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Two Views:

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell by Susanna Clarke

London: Bloomsbury, 2004; £17.99/\$27.95 hc; 782 pages

reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn

Susanna Clarke isn't known to committed sf and fantasy readers. Her delicately crafted contributions to Patrick Nielsen Hayden's *Starlight* anthologies suggested that when she did produce a novel, it would be worth noticing. However, it was not predicted that her first novel would receive as much publicity as the newest Harry Potter. It is beginning to seem less like a book than an event. It remains to be seen how many of the nonfantasy audience, having bought the book, will go on to read it, because this is not an easy read. It is not a book designed for the popular audience.

Design is perhaps the most appropriate word, because the first thing that strikes one about the book is its design. The cover is stark (my UK proof is cream with a raven outline, the US proof was black with the same design). This is a book that could contain magic but is actually a history of magic. It could therefore be an untellable text of a type central to the story within, for in *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, the division between those who study magic and those who practice it is both confused and absolute.

As we open the book, we realize that we have moved past one layer of world and down into a second. This is a history, a fictional book that has taken the voice of nonfiction written as popular biography—a speculative book, one that purports to be a true history. Yet with its speculation into secret thoughts, it is less "true" than a simple novel. It is worth keeping an eye on the narrator John Segundus—a failed magician and a man who never reaches the social center of the circles he describes. A disarmingly pleasant young man, his own fame will be dependent on the popularity of the tale he tells.

The novel or history is bolstered by extensive footnotes that construct a mythic archaeology of England: with notes to unreal texts, to unreal mythologies, this is a fantasy that wears its world building proudly, ribbons and knots on its sleeves. But this antiquarian indulgence, this pedantic elaboration, will intensify the gentle loneliness of the text, the sense of isolation of all its characters in an England far less cohesive than our own. Each footnote points to an England in which localism is still the heart of the matter. As Thomas Hughes wrote of the same period, "We were Berkshire, or Gloucestershire, or Yorkshire boys; and you're young cosmopolitans, belonging to all countries and no countries." *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* resides, like *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, in this moment of change, but where *Tom Brown* was a tale of emerging national identity, *Jonathan Strange* will take England down another path.

England is central to *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, the voice of the novel is rooted in Englishness and an English mode of telling story. It begins extraordinarily slowly, telling of meetings, lengthy arguments, quiet times sitting around the hearth. In the first part particularly, very little happens, because very little happening in

Special Decidedly Anglophilic Issue

Farah Mendlesohn on Susanna Clarke

John Clute on Susanna Clarke

Ariel Hameon on Charles Stross

Ian Elmsley on Gwyneth Jones & James Lovegrove

Adrian Pociobelli on J. G. Ballard

David Mead on Peter Hamilton

Damien Broderick on Bruce Sterling

Plus On Toast, Screed, & an Editorial!

Ariel Hameon

The Singularity Ate My Homework and Other Reasons I Can't Predict the Future

I sighed when I saw the package from NYRSF. Of all the things I had to deal with—chronic viruses, another round of layoffs on the job, and, well, current events (I mean, I've spent weeks pointedly not watching obsequies, ya know?)—writing a review was not one of them. Still, I opened the envelope.

Out fell a copy of Charles Stross's 2002 short story collection, *Town: And Other Rusted Futures* (Canton, Ohio: Cosmos Books, 2002; \$29.99 hc/\$15.00 pb; 244 pages). OK—but then it's not like my pals at NYRSF don't know that I was using a quote from Stross's blog as my e-mail sig line. Or that Stross displaced the truly Scottish Ken MacLeod on my this-year's-best-thing-since-artisanal-bread list. Or that I had been ranting in a Pleasantville kitchen about the present state of the near future, as portrayed in sf, at least. This book was their answer.

Admittedly, my rant was rooted in premillennial times and based more on gut feeling than on any kind of empirical analysis of published material. But given, well, current events, I did think it surprising that there wasn't more near-future stuff around, and that what there was seemed to me to be so faithhearted. Just when things are just getting interesting, too. Weird.

"Blame it on the Singularity," said the Pleasantville crew. "And here's a few authors that are doing good work in that area."

All right, so they knew I was gonna bite.

So what can you say about the next few decades? This got me pondering, in an ad-hoc sort of way, what an sf author can do, short of becoming a weekend worker or giving up and writing some newly weird space opera. And how nothing demonstrates why it's so hard to write about the near future than Charles Stross's attempts to do exactly that. (See *Town*. See *Town*'s subtitle. Read introductory essay: "[T]he

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued on page 4)

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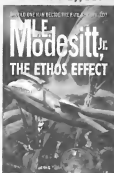
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FEATURES

Ariel Haméon: The Singularity Ate My Homework and Other Reasons I Can't Predict the Future: 1

Iain Emsley: Fantasies of England: 6

David V. Griffin: At the Whitney: 14

Adrian Pocobelli: "Pre-Uterine Claims": Cultural Contexts and Iconographic Parallels in Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*: 18

REVIEWS

Two Views: Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn and John Clute: 1

Amy Thomson's *Storyteller*, reviewed by Greg L. Johnson: 10

Richard K. Morgan's *Broken Angels*, reviewed by Paul Kincaid: 12

Jim Butcher's *Storm Front*, reviewed by Carol Pinchfsky: 12

Peter F. Hamilton's *Pandora's Star*, reviewed by David Mead: 16

Brian Rosebury's *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*, reviewed by Jenny Blackford: 17

Bruce Sterling's *The Zenith Angle*, reviewed by James L. Cambias: 21

Bruce Sterling's *Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years*, reviewed by Damien Broderick: 22

PLUS

Plus: Predict the Future! (4); some Screed (23); and an editorial (24).

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The Singularity Ate My Homework

continued from page 1

pace of change isn't slackening. If anything, it's accelerating; the coming century is going to destroy futures even faster than the last one created them. This collection of short stories contains no work more than a decade old. Nevertheless, one of these stories is already a fossil—past a sell-by-date created by the commercial data processing industry—and the others aren't necessarily far behind" [9].) What's interesting is the degree to which he's succeeded, especially amongst folk who are open to the possibility that this Singularity thing might put them permanently out of touch with their own grandchildren—or whatever their successor entities choose to call themselves.

But I promise I'll try to keep the volume down on the buzz, despite the fact that his career is burning up this very steep curve as I type. Right now, he's got three novels in print. Best known is *Singularity Sky* from Ace, a post-Vine narrative with a godlike AI, the Eschaton, which ensures its continued existence by stomping on anyone who would mess with causality. Though not as well known, *The Atrocity Archive*, from Golden Gryphon Press, is also a tasty bit of work: a dangerously loose-limbed, smart-alecky mash-up. The book comes armed with extras: ample popcult references; an introduction by the aforementioned MacLeod; a short story featuring Stross's programmer protagonist, Bob Howard, the man without a physical description; and an explanatory essay from Stross on his influences.

"Writing in the near future is a perilous proposition," Stross comments in that essay.

I began writing *The Atrocity Archive* in 1999. For Bob's trip to California and his run-in with some frighteningly out-of-their-depth terrorists, I went digging and came back with an appropriately obscure but finical and unpleasant gang who might, conceivably, be planning an atrocity on American soil. But by the time the novel first came into print in the pages of the Scottish magazine *Spectrum SF*, it was late 2001—and editor Paul Fraser quite sensibly suggested I replace Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda with something slightly more obscure on the grounds that, with USAF bombers already pounding the hills of Afghanistan, bin Laden didn't appear to have much of a future. (261-2)

So he replaced al-Qaeda with the members of a group called the Mukhabarat, the private Gestapo of some fellow named Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti. Ah, well. Just goes to show: being wrong about the future isn't half as bad as being right.

A few years ago, Judith Berman summed up a lot of what I felt about the lack of near-future fiction in the essay "Science Fiction Without a Future" (*NYRSE*, May 2001). She explored some possible causes of what she saw as a kind of millennial malaise. I now look back on that timebound dis-ease with fond nostalgia; as we dig into this new century, things have gotten just so much more—oh, yeah—interesting.

Still, after just a little more than a decade, the Singularity has sustained itself as one of the most powerful set of ideas *sf* has produced. Whether you agree or disagree with its premises, there is a high probability that you will find discussing it seriously. As to whether or not the Singularity is a good thing, that's still in the air.

For example, in her follow-up essay, "Models of Time: Examining the Future" (*NYRSE*, September 2002), Berman pondered the suggestion that the Vinge Singularity "has caused a crisis of imagination. Advances are so fast and furious these days, it is argued, that technological and scientific extrapolation into the future becomes difficult, if not impossible." An elegant solution to the death of the near, yes, but does it strike anyone else as enormously funny that a concept so firmly rooted in *sf*'s tradition of rigorous extrapolation should ultimately lead to the conclusion that you *can't* write about the future, near or otherwise, because, by definition, you *can't* know anything about it?

That's what makes me think of the Singularity as hard *sf*'s karma. It's difficult to avoid the religious, yea, even apocalyptic implications of the Vinge Singularity, especially as it developed in the postings of potential early adopters. The moniker "Rapture of the Nerds" was richly deserved, disputed only by those who can't spot a Gnostic at a hundred yards. (See Cory Doctorow's dronk skewering of true believers in "Rapture of the Geeks: Funny Hats, Transcendent Wisdom, and The Singularity" at <www.wholeearth.com>, or Bruce Sterling's somewhat more judicious take in "The Singularity: Your Future as a Black Hole" at <www.longnow.org> under "seminars.") After the exhortation, what's there to talk about?

After thinking about this for a couple of months, I found myself

Ariel Haméon

Predict the Future Like a Pro:

Eight Ways to Destroy Your Reputation as a Prophet

Reading Stross's short work got me thinking about what writers can do, as opposed to what they shouldn't even think of trying. As Stross has discussed in detail in the introduction to *Toast: And Other Rusted Futures*, writing about the future as if it were, well, the future is a losing proposition.

The Early Stross can be seen as a record of strategies that bit the dust in the course of his decade long apprenticeship. I parsed them into loose categories because I have nothing better to do with my evenings. Q.E.D.

1: Place Your Bets

"Ship of Fools" (1995)

Basically "If this goes on—" Pick a trend, extrapolate to the max, type while cackling gleelessly.

The fossil in question: a motley crew of programmers aboard a cruise scheduled for December 31, 1999 spew great chunks of infodump as to just what disasters may await them come midnight. Yeah, a Y2K story, five years in advance. Even in its antediluvian state, the story is still a fun read, and the embedded tales of stupid things corporations can do with computers are always, of course, priceless.

2: Predict the Present

"Declorinating the Moderator" (1996)

Take the look and feel of some subculture, slap some vaporware on it, and add a decade or two to the date. (Thanks to the ever-rippable Bruce Sterling for that phrase.)

2018's Particulate 7 is where kids go to do particle physics in the banquet hall. Big science gets small and falls into the hands of the Pion Overdrive Girls. Bears a striking resemblance to a H.O.P.E. (Hackers on Planet Earth) conference and that ilk.

Careers have been made with this one—careers that sometimes transcend the genre.

3: Plan Your Own Obsolescence

"TOAST: A Con Report" (1998)

The medium-term perils of the edge: burned out by thirty, unable to comprehend those twitchy kids and their sufficiently advanced tech that resembles magic. Even worse, unable to sell outdated skills on the free market.

SF as an exercise in nostalgia: the narrator covers a hackfest for *Your Antiques*. That Altair-1 motherboard in the diamond display case—ah, the stories we could tell!

4: Call Bill Joy

"Extracts from the Club Diary" (1998)

Where would *sf* be without the cautionary tale?

arguing the opposite: the Singularity has, in fact, made it easier to talk about the near future. Tempting as its all-bets-are-off notions were, the Vingean Singularity actually left interested parties ample wiggle room to think—and talk—endlessly about the supposedly indescribable changes just around the bend. Maybe this is because the discussion has taken place primarily amongst technophiles, and given the toolbox Vinge and later ponderers provided—AIs, IA (Intelligence Amplification), nanotech and minting, uploading and Matrioshka brains—they, who could resist? Yeah, sure, maybe we all get reduced to gray goo and AIs eat us for lunch, but then again, think of it this way: the problem was not that the Singularity made extrapolation difficult or impossible; it was that the Singularity was just so damn cool that it rendered any other way of thinking about the near future no fun at all.

But, then, something strange happened in practice. In the hands of technophiles, who took to the Singularity like fish to artificially oxygenated water, the concept of the Singularity changed. They took it apart and put it back together again, and now it doesn't work in quite the same way.

Consider: Stross said in a 2002 interview with Lou Anders, "Unlike Vinge, I do not believe it is impossible to write about what happens after the singularity—however, I think it depends *which* singularity you pick, and how thoroughly your extrapolation pursues second-order effects." Note that the Singularity has now been downgraded from an evolutionary leap with an event horizon beyond which we cannot see, to mere paradigm shift. And paradigm shift has been done: Bruce Sterling, in his Long Now Foundation talk, cites the introduction of atomic weapons as a Singularity. In "Router," Stross even wrote a scene that might wind up being cited as often as Dick's tip of paper marked "Soft Drink Stand," a bunch of uploads are sitting in a bar discussing just when the Singularity happened—1969 when the first internet connection was launched; 2016 when they uploaded a lobster; or never, because it's all religious nonsense.

The original concept of the Singularity invoked a certain degree of deer-in-the-headlights paralysis not because it described the possibility of changes beyond human comprehension—after all, that one's always been on the books—but because it made a credible case for that kind of change coming within the lifetime of people hearing the word. In actual fiction, though, the Singularity did not remain the province of the near future. Space operas I've had my hands on lately

feature hard AI takeoffs and uploads just as prominently as hoary old standbys like FTL drives and intergalactic colonial wars. I suspect what could be done with the concept—in the near term, anyway—has been done, and what remains is another wormhole—a handy way to get from A to B.

The Singularity has been assimilated; it permeates fictive space like background noise from the Big Bang, and makes just about as much difference in the price of eggs.

What it comes down to is what we are really asking for when we say we want near-future fiction. Berman's first essay put it nicely, "With so many writers apparently uneasy about the state of the world, I would expect plenty of mordant commentary on our entanglement in the wheels of the runaway technological locomotive." Well, yes—that is certainly what I'm asking for. And that implies a potentially partisan connection with the real world, as if we are to consider technology in its human context, with its human roots. To be blunt, right now, I want politics—that's what critique means to me; that's what engaged means.

Lou Anders also quotes Stross as saying, "I've lately been trying to project possible futures that don't include any kind of singularity, be it a minor one (like the steam engine) or a massive one (strongly superhuman AIs that are to us as we are to cats and dogs). Mostly they require either a Malthusian collapse, or repressive legislative political forces."

The problem with the near future is not that you can't predict it, but that to a large degree, you can. Right now, you pretty much know what's coming down the pike and it's not the fan. No jet packs. No brave expedition to the next star over. And much as I'd love a Singularity to warp everything beyond all recognition, I really do have the feeling that there's not much any individual can do, technological optimist or not, except plan to live through the quotidian somehow.

Politics, of course, always provides an instant solution to feeling powerless, empty promise or not. Policy wisdom is one obvious response to this state of affairs—long live those legal, ethical, and social implications! Bruce Sterling's *The Zenith Angle* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain* come to immediate mind, all very respectable stuff. But what's been grabbing my heart lately is the more overt, if out of space and out of time, work of guys like Ken MacLeod. Not that guys like MacLeod have got the route for the next march

An alternate history of the last hundred years or so of a small, class-ridden scientific society dedicated to that very '90s drug of choice: caffeine. And the world ends in 2020.

5: Go Singular

"Antibodies" (2000)

Describe the hard take-off of a superhuman AI, the near-future's final solution, in enough convincing detail, and wind up being quoted in nonfiction articles on the Singularity.

My favorite bit: secret agents from another timeline try to save the world:

"Damn it, Bob, I really had high hopes for this world-line.

... Especially Microsoft—"

"Was that one of ours?" She nodded.

"Then it was a master-stroke. Getting everybody used to exchanging macro-infested documents without any kind of security policy. Operating systems that crash whenever a microsecond timer overflows. . . ."

6: Pretend The Laws of the Marketplace

Bear as Much Weight as the Laws of Physics

"Bear Trap" (2000)

Perhaps the earliest story I can think of where the ridiculous heights of the *fin-de-siècle* bubble economy get projected into space opera territory. Market manipulation generates cosmic consequences.

First sentence: "I was six hours away from landfill on Burgundy when my share portfolio tried to kill me." A dry run for lots of concepts that will populate later stories and novels. And giant bugs. But so '90s.

7: Start the Revolution

"Big Brother Iron" (2002)

Techno-optimism 101: it really makes a difference, no?

The iron in question is the mainframe running an Orwellian fascist Britain. Smart guys in the IT department use the machine as it's meant to be used. Jams are kicked, brothers and sisters!

This trip is best taken metaphorically. Counter example: "Unwire," Stross's experiment in on-line collaboration with the exuberant Cory Doctorow (available at <scrapped.com>). Gnuella networks fight the twin evil forces of the FCC and DRM. Getting too real generates a self-by-date even closer than these guys' next Macs.

8: Fuck It All, Let's Do More Lovecraft!

"A Boy and His God" (1997); "A Colder War" (2000)

Hey, when the going gets weird . . .

"A Boy and His God" is just good fun. It's about what it says it's about, but the punch line doesn't completely connect due to a little glitch in the foreshadowing: if you *don't* feel uneasy when Stross makes passing reference to the unspeakable Shub-Niggurath, it really doesn't work. On the other tentacle, "A Colder War" is a bit of a dry run for *The Atavistic Archives*. Starts with the premise that all the stuff described in HPL's "At the Mountains of Madness" was true, and takes the cosmic struggle through WWII and the Cold War, with satisfyingly awful consequences.

Beyond all sane belief. You can't go wrong with this one. Unless, of course . . . ▶

chalked out, but in the place I'm in at the moment, name-checking anything even slightly progressive is enough to be branded revolutionary.

These days I get my fill of stuffy politics from following blogs. If you want mordant commentary, genuine critique, it's all there, albeit in a highly erasable medium. And what I've just acquired in good old-fashioned pulpwood is *Iron Sunrise*. I like it—it's the best writing Stross has done in a novel yet. More to the point, *Iron Sunrise* has got dirty bombs and weapons of mass destruction in the hands of fools, warbloggers, disastrous military occupations, corporate colonialism, a mind-warping terrorist attack just a few years in the past, and a planet-busting retaliatory exercise targeting someone who, uh, didn't do it. . . .

Well, that's the freedom of space opera, right? So far in the future, or so far out of time—after the eschaton—it's not any future at all. But even with Stross's Eschaton creating an instant galactic civilization, there's no escaping the times. I find myself thinking about all the stuff they taught me in school during the Cold War about Yevgeny Zamiatin and other folk who, under various nasty regimes, used sf to say things that they couldn't otherwise say. I get the sense that this fictional freedom is a form of discretion. Once the problem of getting the future right is obliterated, names need not be named.

The horror never ended, but after a while you could learn to live with it. . . . Or rather, you learned to live *between* it, in

the intervals, the white space between the columns of the news, the quiet, civilized times that made the job worthwhile. You learned to live in order to make the whitespace bigger, to *reduce* the news, to work toward the end of history, to make the universe safe for peace. And you knew it was a zero-sum game at best and eventually you'd lose, but you were on the right side so that didn't matter. Somebody had to do it. (239)

Now, I could do that uplifting faith-in-fiction, rah-rah traditional sf values ending here, and it would be appropriate because Stross—and MacLeod and Doctorow for that matter—are some of the most traditional sf writers around. But as I wait for the next poor sucker to lose his head on the net, or for some data miner who couldn't land a better job pushing lifestyle magazines to discover my suspicious public library records, I'm not going to. I really don't have any answers, but I will continue to be happy every time I'm wrong about the near future. And I suspect that if I did have the answers, I wouldn't be writing essays. I'd be writing fiction. ▶

Ariel Haxton nimbled the forebrain with the following songs while writing this essay: Steve Earle, "American" v. 6.0 (The Best We Can Do); La Ley, "Cielo Marker"; The Secret Machines, "Nowhere Again."

Iain Emsley Fantasies of England

Being a review of *United Kingdom* by James Lovegrove (London: Gollancz 2003; £17.99 hc; 416 pages) and the *Bold as Love* series by Gwyneth Jones, comprising *Bald as Love* (London: Gollancz 2001; £17.99 hc; 288 pages), *Cattle Made of Sand* (London: Gollancz 2002; £17.99 hc; 368 pages), and *Midnight Lamp* (London: Gollancz, 2003; £16.99 hc; 320 pages).

There is a debate taking roots on websites, such as *Infinity Plus*, and in magazines, such as *Locus*, spearheaded by Gwyneth Jones and China Miéville, on the need for a fantasy that can deal with the now rather than relying upon the revisiting and revising of standard historical and mythical models. It is a mode of fantasy that seeks to engage with the current social and political world, not isolated into an escapist past, a mode that extrapolates from the present to understand and contextualize a period of present time.

John Clute defines *matter* in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as "an accumulated network of myths, legends and fables about a nation or culture" that is understood to be the true history of the nation or culture by those who perform or recite them. What has been apparent is that British writers have sought to revitalize the Matter of Britain, to understand the current social changes that have sped up since the end of the British Empire and globalization.

In *United Kingdom*, James Lovegrove posits an isolated and decayed Britain that has taken an undefined Unlucky Gamble and is now divided into fictions led by mortal reincarnations of local myths, sealed off from the rest of the world. Rather than using the Arthurian myths, Lovegrove goes back to the native mythology, one that has been overrun by successive invasions of the British Isles but is currently enjoying a time of renewal in popular memory. In the first two novels of the continuing "Bold as Love" sequence, Gwyneth Jones utilizes the Matter of Britain when the Counter Cultural Revolution seizes control of England, which undergoes temporary isolation. Instead of exploring the native myths, she recreates Arthurian mythology in a contemporary world as the struggle of a trio who decide to deal with the situation in disregard to their own comfort.

Because it is a recitation of mythology, *Matter* has a direct connection to the past from the present retelling, hinting therefore that it has a truth to its story that is ingrained through repetition (although it may have grown in the telling). The Matter of Britain is one of the most recognisable Matters, yet skewed, given the longevity of the Arthurian myth, especially within fantasy. This is most likely

because of Malory's fusion of so many myths and matters in his own *Le Morte D'Arthur* that there is a tale for everybody to enjoy. Strangely, the *Morte* is mongrel, combining the Brythonic myths with French lays and *The Mabynigion* and written to entertain as well as teach a specific audience. Malory builds upon the work of Chretien de Troyes, who wrote in the court of Marie de Champagne. Drawing from the Celtic sources, his tale combined fantasy with a resourceful man who stepped up in a difficult social situation and stood up for his civilization despite the personal drawbacks.

Essentially this is where Jones places Ax, Sage, and Florida, the trio at the core of her series. They are the embodiments of the Arthurian archetypes (King, Queen and Courty Champion) as portrayed in the Arthurian source material but updated for a modern situation. For many, rock musicians are icons (even if only temporarily), and they are the most likely group of people to gain popular support. Jones recognizes that the popular mood has drifted away from the political leadership. Counter-cultural links are courted to make politicians more popular (or rather, to seem to be in touch), such as the effort to hype Cool Britannia and a guitar-playing Prime Minister. In the initial days of the revolution, musicians are the pacifying force attempting to bind the land together again in the Dissolution Summer. But this early success cannot gloss over the incredible problems that they face, with Sage and Ax having to go to Bradford to deal with an Islamic uprising. This is a Britain in the throes of social change, with a sharp increase in the second-generation immigrant population. Ax can only find a way through the military problem by converting to Islam. His solution to mapping the new belief system onto his own rock star lifestyle is to be pragmatic, looking towards the basics of the belief system and working his own way through the faith.

Jones also takes control of the love triangle that traditionally cleaves the monarchy through her adoption of a three-way relationship among the Triumvirate, thus establishing that there are viable models outside of standard relationships.

What Jones's fantasies achieve is to explore the current political and social situation in Britain. She recognizes that her literature cannot be totally divorced from the contemporary world. She brings her own experiences and reflections to her writing, not only in terms of the chosen material and story but also as an individual, from her history as a music fan. From this comes a sequence that succeeds in entertaining while dealing with resourceful people who have to deal with an

increasingly desperate situation.

Yet this mythology is defused in *Midnight Lamp* when an internal e-mail from a commentator suggests that the tale has grown in the telling, as happens with mythology. The retelling relies upon an oral narration that has certain plot trajectories, but the path towards these points is negotiated by the storyteller and thus new meanings accrue around the retelling. Mythology and literature cannot be separated from the society that memorializes the tale and retells it, because the narrator is often bound to the society. So Jones reflects upon the way in which myths and Matters are built up and passed on to other listeners. By adapting the tale to modern tastes, Jones continues this process, allowing the mythology that she uses to take on a newer layer of meaning and resonance within contemporary Britain.

In contrast to Gwyneth Jones's application of a cross-class leadership, Lovegrove creates a fantasy that deals effectively with the collapse of the rural middle class in the face of a threat from urban London. What he also explores is the way in which people adopt their own gods as a crutch in a desperate situation. Curiously, the Green Man and the giants who ruled Albion are often ignored or overlooked, as if we are embarrassed or ignorant of our own mythology. This is probably due to the waves of invasions that systematically brought mainland European mythologies to overlay the natural belief systems that were subjugated because they belonged to the underclass. In *United Kingdom*, Lovegrove posits that the native British gods who have lain under the surface, out of sight and mind in popular consciousness, re-emerge into popular consciousness.

Although the new "gods" are shown to be mortal through the death of the Green Man at the hands of King Cunt, protagonist Fen's journey leads him to become the Green Man in terms of reforming the land and revivifying his own little patch. When his wife is taken in the raid with the other women, Fen realizes that he must leave his comfy home in Downbourne and travel to the scaled sprawl of London and deal with the outside threat. At the end, when he transforms himself into a new Green Man, he's explicitly demonstrating that an archetype is what we make it. He becomes a living archetype, shaped and configured by his travelling experiences—his own kind of Green Man—the pagan version of the cycle of life and rebirth.

Rather than taking this literally, as per the previous "gods," Fen moves into the archetypal role of the Green Man. The third section, in which Fen lies alone, broken-legged and helpless out in the countryside, shows the absence of any kind of god. Fen is exposed to pitiless, merciless Nature; he is abandoned and like an animal. When the dogs attack him, he is no better than prey, and it is in this period of utter godlessness and despair that he has his first Green Man dream. Fen begins his own journey towards self-healing and learning about the land around him. Rather than see it as a feature to traverse, he begins to understand that there are needs that must be understood if the land is to be fruitful.

The increasing multi-culturalism of Britain and own legends that have been brought to the adopted homeland, are explored with the Jagannatha—an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu that is sometimes brought from its temple on a huge cart. (Some fanatical believers have thrown themselves under the cart as a sacrifice to the god.) The train in the novel, named *Jagannatha*, is decorated with painted Hindu gods. Its driver doesn't necessarily believe in them, but they cover the hodywork of his vehicle like graffiti. He uses them as a comfort, as his family has returned to India while he careers around Britain in his locomotive. Fen comes aboard and becomes aware of these gods, who are alien to him. He becomes a partial sacrifice to the Jagannatha when he escapes and is immobilized by broken legs. In such a broken land, each fiefdom has its own gods and so Lovegrove introduces the idea of the *larer*, the Roman household gods, during Fen's sojourn at the country house in Beam. The Roman analogy draws out the ideas of the landed classes (who can survive with their own natural reserves) and the many invaders of Britain who brought their own belief systems. Fen cannot assume the god mantle within that milieu because he cannot understand the rhythms and so he takes the object most useful to him—the car—to get to the outskirts of London.

Lovegrove allows Fen to grow and develop within the journey as he endures his ordeals. He moves from a cozy middle-class existence that can safely ignore the difficulties beyond the town boundaries to

a character with a wider awareness of what is happening in the land. He only gains the pass to London through a moment of truth, and when he surrenders to the fact that he is an animal and part of the system, his journey towards rebirth as the Green Man can begin. In contrast, the train driver and King Cunt are debased idols because they use the mythology as a crutch without moving towards an understanding of the true meaning of their chosen god.

In many ways, *United Kingdom* is a cozy rebirth novel. It deals with middle-class politics from a middle class perspective whereas Jones contends with the wider perspective of a country in deep crisis. What Lovegrove does is to contend with the rebirth of the native myths and the accommodation of foreign beliefs, demonstrating how the Matter of Britain is being broadened and to some extent debased through misuse, whereas Jones uses the Matter of Britain to explore the reactions of the triumvirate dealing with the collapse of the social and political order. In effect, she strips the mythology back to the real folk beneath the stories, taking into account the modern movement to viewing rock stars as icons and distrust in mainstream politics. Contrasting to this, Lovegrove strips Fen back to his primal instincts but then begins to accrete new layers, never fully interacting with the societies around him, changing them only by the accident of his presence. He portrays a cold society that is unable to fully comprehend the events happening around them.

Jones takes the idea of fantasy of Now to heart more fully than Lovegrove, exploring contemporary society and extrapolating ways of dealing with the situation. She brings the individual to the fore of mythology and the Matters. Although the retelling begins to expand the mythology surrounding the triumvirate, Jones punctures this mythologizing with the e-mails in *Midnight Lamp*. Lovegrove returns to the native myths of the land, allowing them to begin retelling themselves, showing how they can be used or abused for control purposes. What he does is to explore a fear of the so-called Middle England. In such a way he does deal with a real fear within UK society and shows how it accretes mythologies without necessarily understanding what they are doing.

Both novels join the process of pushing fantasy into dealing with issues that are real to the contemporary world, rather than escaping into a mythical past, and the authors show how they can approach this from different perspectives. They disagree with each other in a voice and viewpoint, but both portray the realities of their own situations with their inventions. They also show how the Matter of Britain is still relevant to fantasy, that it should not be confined to the ghetto, but is still a potent critical and exploratory tool. ►

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Men in Black



Stephen Dedman, John Clute, Neil Gaiman, & Terry Pratchett ride the up escalator at Noreascon 4.

Two Views: Jonathan Strange . . .

continued from page 1

intensely political ways is perhaps the heart of what the English novel of the nineteenth century was about. In the first part of *Jonathan Strange*, as in a Trollope novel, matters of great political weight happen offstage and are then discussed in hushed and scandalized tones in the drawing rooms of the genteel. In this world, gentlemen don't work; they have interests and are permitted a little eccentricity in their choice. What for others might be a source of scandal, for the gentleman is an indication that his stature is high enough to imbue the dubious with morality.

In this context, magic becomes the interest of the leisured, as natural science was in our world. Magic crosses the boundaries of the respectable antiquarian with the less respectable experimental. In part, it is acceptable because magic does not work, because most books of magic are, rather, books about magic. When John Segundus, that promising young man, arrives in York, no one has seen a practical magician for more than two hundred years and the practice of magic has declined as the influence of the North, once ruled by the fierce prince John Usglass, has similarly declined.

All of this changes when Segundus and his friend Mr. Honeyfoot agree to call on Mr. Norrell, a Yorkshire gentleman of reclusive habits, and are presented with his claim that he is a practical magician.

The telling of this tale is as important as the tale itself. Whimsy has been the mood of the moment in certain parts of fantasy, but whimsy is perhaps the hardest of tones to pull off. As with humor, there are no near misses, no mildly whimsical novels. Whimsy, when it fails, is unawkward and embarrassing, when it pleases, it is delicate china painted with a single hair sable brush. Clarke creates her whimsy with the physical and historical background. John Usglass, the Raven King, is initially presented as a curiosity, a subject for antiquarians, not scholars. His marks litter the country on parish records and town names, adding to the sense of the North as *quaint* in the eyes of sensible, rational southerners.

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell tells of the return of English magic. Its concerns are essentially local: the rivalries of magicians, of slow courtship within marriage, of the Peninsular War and English politics, of the revival of *fairie*, the restoration of a king, a tale of lost identities and of the manners and mores of Englishness and its historical and often overlooked rival, Northernness, of centralization and of localism. The voice of confinement constructs insularity. The gentry is so small that politics and friendship are inseparable. England is all in all to them; only once do we hear of the possibility that other countries might have magicians. This history and this adventure is about *English* magic, about, if you will, a manifest destiny that links England and England alone (never Britain) to the roads of *fairie*. It thus seems appropriate that Jonathan Strange seeks to remake England as he helps Wellington remake Europe.

It is an instauration novel that remakes more than one place.

When Mr. Norrell agrees to perform magic for the magicians of York, he does so only on condition that they give up their magic. John Segundus declines to sign, but the others, either doubting or determined (as in Mr. Honeyfoot's case) to see magic worked, concede. Mr. Norrell's magic works spectacularly as York Minister breaks into leaf and the statues speak. For one moment, the grey stuffiness of York (a city almost entirely without trees) is broken. But in the bargain he has forced, Mr. Norrell reveals his own disapproval of the works of magics. His outrageous display is an ironic contrast to the process of pruning and winnowing he wishes to impose.

Mr. Norrell is a knowledge miser. Publicly dedicating himself to the revival of English magic, Mr. Norrell would codify it, bowdlerize its texts, make it "suitable" for genteel society. At the same time, Mr. Norrell is incapable of believing that anyone else has the rectitude to risk the contamination with magic that its study would force. Mr. Norrell, although he does not conceive of himself this way, is the Evil Magician of the plot. His is an England in which the elite decide what others should know, in which education is not merely unavailable to some, but unsuitable. In our world at this time, this England was already under attack, as Adult Schools sprang up around nonconformism. In Mr.

Norrell's England, the rupture will be much greater.

Having succeeded in closing down the York magicians, Mr. Norrell relocates to London and seeks audience with the government, but he succeeds only in falling in with the party crowd—the cynic Lascelles and the social parasite Drewlright. His attempts to gain access to the government come to nothing until he is introduced to Sir William Pole.

William Pole has the misfortune to be engaged to a woman dying of consumption. When she dies before the wedding, Sir William loses his chance at a fortune that will keep him in politics. Mr. Norrell sees this dilemma as his route to the government and, behind closed doors, brings the young woman back to life. But to do so he makes a bargain with the *Faerie King*, promising a portion of Lady Pole's life to *faerie*—indicated by her missing little finger. The pact with *faerie* and Mr. Norrell's miserly approach to English magic form the two fronts on which the novel hangs.

Mr. Norrell's magic is all of book learning. Jonathan Strange, when he appears, is a very different type of magician, an *experimental* magician. It is one of the ironies of the novel that it is Mr. Norrell's squirming away of all the available books of magic that has forced Jonathan Strange to experiment with possibilities and with the feeling in the back of his head that tells him how to get into an idea. Their friendship is taut, hedged with rivalry and with disapproval on both sides. It is barely a friendship, held together with rigid English politeness that will not permit outright challenge. When Jonathan Strange is sent to the Peninsular War to assist Wellington, the bonds come close to breaking. Strange makes of magic something energetic and spontaneous and begins to unpick his need for either his tutor or the books his tutor has hidden.

This second section is told in a quite different mode. From Trollope we move to C. S. Forester, from the drawing rooms of England to a rough and ready frontier where politeness is less important than a handy supply of alcohol and tobacco. It is one of the achievements of the novel that Clarke can move gracefully from the claustrophobic space of parlor and meeting room to the Mediterranean tones of abandoned battlefields and, in the third section, to the wild landscapes of northern England. Clarke does this while resisting easy metaphors of landscape and character. The struggles that emerge between Mr. Norrell and Jonathan Strange are for the control of these different landscapes, not over which one will predominate.

The magicians fight over the democratization of knowledge and therefore of society. Mr. Norrell has no allies, only servants. Strange has no servants but many allies and friends, including John Segundus, the theoretical magician who showed the rare mettle to stand up to Mr. Norrell's intimidation. It is John Segundus who is to be the invisible author of this text, the omniscient present tense indicating a familiarity between fictive author and subject.

Elsewhere in England, the boundary that Mr. Norrell breached is rippling through reality. Stephen Black, Negro butler to Sir William Pole, becomes an unwilling favorite of the *faerie king*, a flaxen-haired old gentleman in a green coat. The *faerie king* watches jealously over Lady Pole and takes her to dance in his corrupt and decaying court each evening. Stephen, used to a functional invisibility in a white world, finds himself doubly invisible as he moves through the land with the king, yet also strangely present as the king conspires to have Stephen recognized as something and someone special. Through the king's negotiations with Stephen, we learn something of race and racism in the early nineteenth century.

When the king steals Jonathan Strange's wife, Strange flees to Italy to mourn her death, leaving behind for publication a stinging attack on Norrell. Norrell's suppression of the text proves his undoing, and the magicians begin their contention for the heart of English magic. Norrell strives to tame it, to make it polite and southern. Jonathan Strange returns instead to its roots, asking how there can be English magic without the legendary John Usglass, the northern prince, the unnamed slave, the Raven King.

Strange's attempts to reconnect magic to *faerie* take him into the world of madness, into secret passages between worlds. A prophecy follows him around, but he is its tool, not its end. As he reopens the roads to *faerie* he changes England, its new cartography reshaping class

politics as magicians begin to appear from all walks of life and fierce is restored to the refreshing of England.

There are three very distinct sections to *Jonathan Strange*. Apparently, the original plan was to publish the book in three parts, and this sectioning remains distinct. Each of the three parts is its own voice: the first may seem too slow. But this snail-like pace is the point of this part of the novel: This is a much slower world, a world not yet at war. It is a pre-industrial world in which letters take a week and friends arrive unannounced and stay for a fortnight. In this context, knowledge can be hoarded; there aren't the channels through which it can leak. The arrival of Jonathan Strange and of the Peninsular War drives the change of pace; Jonathan Strange is of a different time, one in which middle-class gentlemen will seek meaningful occupation, in which messages become urgent and their effect immediate.

By the end of the novel, we are in the mid-nineteenth century and just as the trains link the temporal world, rediscovered fairy paths will speed up the communication with the ethereal. This last part of the novel may be the least successful. Clarke has constructed much of the fantasy through the incongruity of English restraint. Stephen Black's first encounter with the Faerie King begins when he answers the call of a house bell and finds an unknown man in a room that shouldn't be there: "He supposed the gentleman must be a guest of Sir Walter's or Lady Pole's—which explained the gentleman, but not the room. Gentlemen are often invited to stay in other people's houses. Rooms hardly ever are" (143). The delights of this novel are frequently in the little matters, in the likes of Mr. Honeyfoot, a recognizable member of the English gentry (not too bright but equipped with a strong sense of honor), who spends his life in search of justice for a woman killed in York Minster centuries before; in the carefully delineated life of Stephen Black, butler to Sir William Pole, and the child of a captured African, in the high-spirited nature of Arabella Strange who keeps her courage and her hope alive, even trapped in faerie. But by the end of the book Clarke has been forced to bring all this to the fore. Magic is out in the open, the connections with faerie re-energized. It is a grandstand ending, but with an inevitable loss of the delicacy that elsewhere makes this novel such a gentle delight. ▶

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reviewed by John Clute

Anyone who is not dead will know we have a problem here. The problem, for anyone still exposed to any of the media that afflict the living, is hype. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*—an extremely English fantasy about the unthinning of the world set in an England at a cusp of change two centuries ago—has been so mercilessly oversold by Bloomsbury that it is almost impossible to open this huge volume without premonitions of loathing. These premonitions may soon dissolve in the crisp, civil radiance of Susanna Clarke's narrative voice, which she has assembled out of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, and possibly Ann Radcliffe, in order to seductively negotiate her early nineteenth-century setting, but the factor of hype does, inevitably, block one's attempts to traverse this ultimately almost-superb first novel without tripping over spaniel dew. The decks need to be swabbed before we can really get a look in.

It is unfortunate that we must therefore focus for a moment on Neil Gaiman, who is here, as always, generously supportive of his fellow writers, but Bloomsbury has used as dust-jacket copy a somewhat overstated claim from him about the importance of the book, which, in the context of the hype blizzard, does less good than Gaiman might have hoped. This is all the more unfortunate because, stripped of excess, Gaiman's statement points right to the heart of the book. We do, all the same, have to start with what he does actually say, which is that *Strange* is "unquestionably the finest English novel of the fantastic written in the last 70 years." To which one's immediate response is: Bollocks! But there is a still, small voice in there. What Gaiman was pretty clearly not quite getting around to saying in clear was that, in his opinion, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* was the finest English novel of the fantastic since Hope Mirrielees's great *Land-in-the-Mist* (1926), which is almost certainly the finest English fantasy about the relationship between England and the fantastic yet published. (A personal communication from Gaiman has

confirmed this sense that Mirrielees was very much on his mind.)

So we're entering the heartland. There is only one thing to clear up, the claim that Clarke's undoubtedly remarkable first novel does actually excel any other English novel about the relationship between England and the fantastic, a relationship that ordonnates almost every English fantasy of merit published since *Land-in-the-Mist*, including the central works of J. R. R. Tolkien, T. H. White, C. S. Lewis, Philip Pullman, Alan Garner, Michael Moorcock, M. John Harrison, Mervyn Peake, and for that matter Neil Gaiman. To iterate these names (and they are by no means the only English authors who have influenced her) makes it clear that Susanna Clarke, in *Strange*, has partaken of and contributed to a long and honorable English tradition, a long conversation of genre. Nor is her contribution negligible. A more cautious claim about the stature of her offering might run something like this: if Susanna Clarke finishes the story she has hardly begun in *Strange*, and if she does so within the confines of the three-book contract she has apparently gained from Bloomsbury to accomplish that task, she may well have then written the finest English novel of the fantastic about the myth of England and the myth of the fantastic and the marriage of the two ever published, bar none of the above, including Mirrielees.

Austen Powers

So the veils begin to fall. Though the Bloomsbury machine does not mention the fact that *Strange* is the first volume of a much larger enterprise, Clarke has made this clear in interviews. My own reading of the text would have been made much easier had I read any of these interviews in advance, as I would not have had to struggle with the presumption that *Strange* could be read as a tale that was meant to conclude; that this painstaking prelude to a new *Story of the World* was meant to comprise in itself the instauration and triumph of that new *Story of the World*, a new world irradiated by a magical strangeness—which it absolutely, obdurately does not. Readers of this review (and of interviews with Clarke) will not have the same struggle. They will know in advance that *Strange*, like John Crowley's *Aegypt* (1987), opens the gates but does not travel through them.

But there are, I am afraid, a couple more veils to slit. The dozen or so full-page illustrations by Portia Rosenberg, whose work I've not encountered previously, are quite astonishingly inappropriate in the context of Clarke's not-perfect creation of an idiom that rarely violates the timbre and tessitura of early nineteenth-century prose style. Rosenberg did not seem to think it her brief even remotely to heed the references Clarke makes to artists like George Cruikshank and George Rowlandson, whose works are central examples of early nineteenth-century illustration, which is line-dominated, intricate, scabrous, cartoonlike, savage, and funny. Rosenberg's work is simultaneously soft and wooden, as though she were imitating (without quite understanding) Edward Ardizzone on a bad Sunday, fatally Heritage Society, fatally National Trust tea service special offer, fatally and distastefully sentimental about a world Clarke clearly wants us to enter in our hearts and minds.

And one final veil, a veil of great delicacy and beauty and wit, the veil of language. The instrument Clarke has constructed to tell her story is extremely subtle, extremely potent, and hardly fables, pushing the envelope of Jane Austen's rennet with fluent and learned skill. It is a joyful and intoxicating creation; sentence after sentence tickles at the tongue to be uttered aloud, and this, I think, is the problem. Either Clarke, or her agent (the very much missed Giles Gordon, who died earlier this year), or her editors at Bloomsbury, or indeed all of them, seem to have been so caught up in the exhilaration of the language of *Strange* that they failed to note that almost every scene in the first 300 pages should have been carefully and delicately *trimmed*; that many of these scenes do almost nothing to advance a story that begs, often unavailingly, to be continued; and that (in the end) the crystalline civility of the Austenesque voice begins to balk its author's clear need to convey something of the smell of worlds beyond the fields we know, as the novel (whose story we're almost ready to hint at) begins to pry the gates open. In the end, in other words, that civility of language works as an engine to maintain the world, not to change it, an effect only intensified by Clarke's great skill at deploying Austen; in the end, it is a civil language, wedded to the thinning it depicts.

Strange but Not a Stranger

We begin in 1806, in the north of an England identical to the England we know, with two main exceptions. It is universally understood that magic—always, it seems, enacted through the invocation of spells learned from Books—has existed from time immemorial, but that over the past centuries magic has thinned from the world. The second exception is magico-political: For 300 years at the height of the Middle Ages, the north of England was ruled by John Uskglass, which is not his True Name. (The fact that several True Names are referred to but that we are told none of them is one of Clarke's clearest internal signals that this novel is just the start of something.) Though born mortal, Uskglass had at an early age become king of Faerie, and of Another Land of which we may learn more in further volumes. From these ascendancies, it is to be presumed, he gained immortality and an amused, supernatural insouciance. Even in 1806, echoes of Uskglass's enormously long reign can be heard throughout the North—one of Clarke's many conversations with genre seems certainly to have been with Joan Aiken, whose *Is* (1992; U.S. title *Is Underground*) dislocates its readers from consensual history precisely through a division of England on north-south lines (there are other similarities, too). So we are in England, but not quite in the England we know. But it is precisely the England we know that—due to the thinning of the world—shows its face most clearly.

In the absence of real magic, in the failure or refusal of John Uskglass to show himself, those who now call themselves magicians are in effect antiquarians. A society of these in York is impelled by a new member, John Segundus (who may eventually turn out to be the author of *Stranger* and its sequels), to challenge a magician named Gilbert Norrell to prove his claim that he is in fact capable of real magic. He does so, from a distance, spectacularly—animating the stone sculptures adorning York Cathedral until the conglomeration of old stories caught in stone nearly defends the city. It is soon clear that Norrell, a reclusive figure miserly of his vast library of Books of Magic, has exposed himself for a reason: He wishes to reinstate magic in England, but only the decorous, rule-bound forms of Book Magic he himself approves of. Only slowly (everything is slow in *Stranger*) do we begin to understand that Norrell's caution does not simply reflect his need to hoard his knowledge and to control its use. He is also, inarticulately, apprehensive of a return of naked magic, of the chaos that might ensue, the lack of order, the cavitation of the real. Very, very late in the game of *Stranger*, we also begin to understand that, more

than anything, he is terrified at the thought that John Uskglass himself might return, and, in returning, give England back to the elements, to the elementals, that the old, old Story might become a new Story of the world.

These apprehensions are moderately difficult for Clarke to convey through her chosen idiom; not until page 512, in fact, does she allow Norrell's mysterious servant Childermass to subvocalize (as it were) what looks to me to be the central movement of story in *Stranger*, the central gate it unlocks but does not quite unlatch:

In his weakened state Childermass had been thinking aloud. He had meant to say that if what he had seen was true, then everything that Strange and Norrell had ever done was child's play and magic was a much stranger and more terrifying thing than any of them had thought of. Strange and Norrell had been merely throwing paper darts about a parlour, while real magic soared and swooped and twisted on great wings in a limitless sky far, far above them.

But then he realized that Mr Norrell was unlikely to take a very sanguine view of such ideas and so he said nothing.

A passage like this takes Jane Austen way beyond the fields she wishes to describe, and Clarke is careful to restrict her organ notes to moments such as this. (Of her predecessors, T. H. White uses similar shifts of diction to convey a similar sense that the real story he is telling, whether or not the surface of the tale admits it, is in fact the real story, and never forget it.) But we remember the great wings and the limitless sky above an England caught in the thinning; and we expect that the magic—perhaps in the form of the innumerable ravens whom everyone in the north of England knows stand for Uskglass—will land.

But first Norrell has to leave York and begin to establish himself in London, where the war against Napoleon dominates the government. A highly placed politician loses his young wife to a strange illness and is induced to ask Norrell for help. In order to gain influence, Norrell invokes Faerie, which manifests as "the gentleman with thistle-down hair"—a frivolous, deadly, heartless, gay figure whose avatar appears in *Laid-in-the-Mist* and whose nature and habitat are described in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1976). He is only truly controllable by Uskglass himself; Norrell's bargain—the young woman returns to life, but half her time must be spent dancing the nights away in Faerie—is a bad one from the get-go, not only because it subjects her to a living death (Faerie itself, as Clarke puts it somewhere, is a bit like the north of Scotland in the rain) but

Storyteller by Amy Thomson

New York: Ace Books, 2003; \$14.00 tpb; 372 pages

reviewed by Greg L. Johnson

At the beginning, *Storyteller* has the look and feel of a pastoral fantasy. Though set on Thalassa, an alien planet, the society presented seems decidedly low-tech. Markets feature open stalls of hand-made and home-grown foods and crafts, history is preserved by wandering storytellers who are paid by passing the hat.

Thalassa is a water world, with scattered islands for humans to live on. There is an indigenous, telepathic species, the Harsels, who resemble large sailing fish. Many of the stories told by the storytellers on Thalassa derail the life of the Pilot, the first human on Thalassa, and her adventures surviving and contacting the Harsels.

Teller is one of the elder storytellers on Thalassa. When she encounters a street orphan named Samad, she eventually rescues him and takes him along on her journey, hoping to find a family for him. *Storyteller* is mainly the story of Teller and Samad, and their relationship to each other and to the world they live in. It is a story that is centered not on conflict or antagonism but rather on the desires and hopes of the characters. There is some

adventure to be had, and an alien world to explore, but Thomson is more concerned with showing us her characters than the world they live in. Like most people, both Teller and Samad have secrets they are not necessarily eager to share, and it is those secrets and their uncovering that provide the tension and momentum in the story.

Thalassa presents us with a fairly uncomplicated, idyllic society. There is more going on behind the scenes, however. Thalassa is part of a much larger spacefaring civilization, and it slowly becomes apparent that some people on Thalassa do have access to computers and other high-tech devices. The level of use of technology is at least partly a choice. It may also be an economic issue; the planet is a relatively recently settled colony. There are also politics involved. Thalassa's existence as a near-utopia is dependent on the behind-the-scenes involvement of a very wealthy individual who maintains a network of people who keep a look-out for developing social problems, and then take steps to correct them. This leads to the age-old problem: what do you do when the benevolent dictator is going to die?

You search for an heir, of course. It's the story of that search that

also begins to open the gates.

Still, Norrell is now famous and begins to assist in the war effort. I am not expert in the Napoleonic Wars, but I have the impression that Norrell's, and later Strange's, efforts to aid England have the effect of ensuring that the war comes out *exactly* as it did in our own history: the reinstatement of magic in England, it seems, has the main effect of sustaining the old England. The only date to violate our own history—it is, I believe, the latest date given in a text full of dates—relates to the death of Byron, who in 1816 insults "the gentleman" (he is never named) by continuing to talk and who is therefore cursed to die in five years. A footnote (the novel dangles with footnotes, some supererogatory, some twice, some pretty fascinating) duly informs us that Byron does die in 1821, some years after *Strange* ends. As this date is three years short of Byron's real death in 1824, we may indeed assume that the ravens do land somewhere early in volume two, and that a new Story of the World has therefore then begun.

The Magic Returns

Norrell's fame arouses the interest of a brilliant young man of good birth named Jonathan Strange, who becomes his pupil. Their relationship is never easy, as Strange is entirely disinclined to go by the Book (and in any case Norrell refuses him access to his unique library). Norrell is soon estranged from his pupil, who has gone to Spain to help Lord Wellington in his campaign and who makes magic up in order to do so. This makes Norrell jealous, and appalls him, and the novel begins finally to climb toward an ending which will (one assumes) slingshot us into the larger arena of the next volume.

Around about here, Clarke almost drops the ball. After the apparent death of his wife, Strange has gone to Venice, where, on page 568—very late to introduce significant characters—he meets an entire family named Greysteel, who turn out in fact to have absolutely no function in the story that could not have been conveyed otherwise, through other eyes and hands, in a paragraph or two. But Clarke can't leave them alone, even though her huge prologue of a novel is begging to have to end. I think, once again, it is the trap of the style: It is so much fun to write the Greysteels, to explore their Englishness in Clarke's unsopporably impeccable Austenese, that nobody cared to tell her to scissor them out completely, nobody seems to have cared that she almost loses her novel right here, *because of her virtues*. Virtue is not enough. But finally the Greysteels do trapeze offstage, in the end, when there is no way to retain them any longer. The story bales itself of them. They sink into the lagoon. Bye-bye.

reveals to us some of the larger and more complicated civilization of which Thalassa is a fairly obscure part. That revelation also leads to the confirmation of a suspicion that *Storyteller*, while in many ways a novel with a thoroughly postmodern political outlook, is also a comment on some of the most traditional political ideas in sf. With its combination of an orphaned youth who discovers ties to a world larger and darker than he imagined, plus an authority figure wise in the ways of political and economic power, *Storyteller* in many ways resembles a kinder, gentler version of *Citizen of the Galaxy*. There are other things going on in the novel, of course. Thomson is more interested in the interplay of character than Heinlein, for one, and both Samad and Teller have personal problems that would never have appeared in any of his juveniles.

But Thalassa's social structure, with its combination of limited use of high-tech devices along with an avoidance of many of the social ills attendant upon mass-market capitalism, has been highly influenced and supported by the actions of an exceptional individual. It's government by the philosophical man who knows better, presented in its most classic form in *The Republic*. Whatever position you take on the argument presented by Plato, it's hard to deny that *The Republic* is extremely antidemocratic. The theme of the super-competent individual surviving despite the flaws of the society surrounding him or her is prevalent in Heinlein, and in *Storyteller*, Thomson gives her character much more influence over

Meanwhile, "the gentleman with thistle-down hair" has attempted to draw King George III, who is mad, into Faerie, so that his own candidate for kingship, a black man named Stephen Black, can mount the throne, but he has been thwarted by Strange. Things begin to get naked. The novel darkens. Strange's own (living) wife is abducted into Faerie; Norrell by magic attempts to eradicate Strange's newly published book on the subject; Waterloo, which Clarke describes with blackened decorum, transpires; and the book begins to mount toward a cunningly plotted slingshot, in which all the main characters meet or do not meet, and Faerie begins to crosshatch more and more terrifyingly with the mundane world, in passages of considerable splendor, especially those in which Faerie is described as intrinsic with meaning: Faerie Story; Faerie as

a kind of puzzle or labyrinth [in which] "everything had meaning. Stephen [Black] hardly dared take another step. If he did so—if, for example, he stepped into that shadow or that spot of light, then the world might be forever altered.

And Uskglass himself flickeringly appears.

Everything has happened in order for that to happen.

In the end, we understand that Norrell and Strange have not themselves brought magic back to England, that they are not of themselves the agents of change. What they are is something entirely different, something that points us to the next volume. In the words of Vinculus, a man whose skin has been tattooed from within, at birth, with Uskglass's own primal Book of Magic and whose torso seems to generate new tattoos—new pages of the Book—whenever they are called for:

Their work! . . . Theirs! Do you still not understand? They are the spell John Uskglass is doing. That is all they have ever been. And he is doing it now!

And the book closes on the cusp of Uskglass. When we reach the end of the last page of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, we are standing at the brink of a new story. We hope we'll be able to follow her into that new Story. If Susanna Clarke continues to do it now, we will follow her anywhere. ►

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the shape of society than most of Heinlein's characters ever achieved

Thalassa's society is a pretty creation that hovers on the edge of an age-old political debate, whether one person or institution should be trusted with enough power to manage a calm, orderly society, or whether the rules should strive to prevent the accumulation of too much power in one place. The first approach runs the constant risk of dictatorship and tyranny; the second seems to result in a messy sort of people's rule that generally muddles along but may not react well in times of crisis. It's the question of how the inhabitants of Thalassa would react during a crisis, rather than what their behind-the-scenes benefactors would do, that is not dealt with in *Storyteller*.

Storyteller does a fine job of telling its characters' personal stories. It's a story without much in the way of conflict or violence, though there are some scenes from the life of the Harshels that feature both. And, by taking a look into a wider world, it opens a way for the author to tackle some of the bigger issues raised by her characters and the society they have created. There's room in this universe for more stories, and for Thomson to use those stories to delve deeper into the underpinnings of her world and of its philosophical basis. ►

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Broken Angels by Richard K. Morgan
New York: Del Rey, 2004; \$14.95 tpb; 384 pages
reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Sadistic amorality is never out of fashion. We like it too much, violence and its effects, so long as there is a cinema screen or a TV tube or a page between us and the actual experience. We like the vicarious thrill of discovering a new way to cause hurt, of watching yet another slow, agonizing death. It is the staple of our most popular fiction, the crime thriller, the war novel, which is why the novelist and journalist William T. Vollman has just produced—has been able to produce—a seven-volume, 3,000-page study of violence. Of course we do not want the searing flesh, the heaving limbs presented in their most pure form. The violence needs to be filtered, preferably through the eyes of a bruised romantic, a Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, whose world-weary and distanced reactions can convince us that there is some moral purpose, some ethical weight, to the horror presented. Through this brutal world a man must go who is not himself brutalized, so that we might feel safe with him as our eyes. The trouble is that the urge for ever greater sensation, the highly colored violence that needs to become yet more lurid if it is to appear yet more novel, has come a long way in the fifty years or so since Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe walked their particular mean streets. It is becoming progressively more difficult to tell the difference between brutality and brutalization; the hero, for such we still want him to be, must be capable of inflicting ever greater conscienceless pain just to display his credentials in this particular game.

Thus Takeshi Kovacs, the far-future mercenary who is our latest pseudo-Marlowe, can casually slay half a dozen men simply to attract the attention of a big corporation, with never a hint that this might be wrong (he is our hero, after all), with never a suggestion that there might be a price to pay for this crime. Thus Richard Morgan, our highly praised new young hero-author, can devise as a spectator sport an execution that promises an entire day of unalleviated excruciation for the victim, and that can be brought to an end only by the casual slaughter of the cheering audience. Thus *Broken*

Angels, Morgan's second novel and the second outing for Kovacs, has a body count in the high hundreds (if we ignore such collateral damage as a large city nuclear bombed to extinction just to show off the ruthlessness of Morgan's corporate villains), most of the slaughter perpetrated personally by our hero, and most of it serving no dramatic purpose other than to pep up a slow-moving plot.

Of course, these are not really deaths as we might understand them. In this future the personality is encoded into a cylinder that is lodged in the spine. After death this cylinder can be retrieved (messily, of course, as we are shown in great and bloody detail) and the personality can inhabit a virtuality, or be lodged in a new body—or sleeve, as it is known. So this isn't really slaughter, just removing one sleeve so that another might be pulled on at a later date. How easy it is to sanitize the nastiness of killing. Except that the victims still experience agony, and in the vast majority of the killings recorded in this novel great care is taken to ensure that no personality can be recovered afterwards.

What is sad is that Richard Morgan is clearly a very talented writer, there are superb set pieces and mind-blowing original ideas all the way through this novel, yet he settles for mindless violence as a way of driving the plot, and he does nothing with this wonderful idea of sleeves. Kovacs himself, and most of the people he meets, are ageless, have already inhabited a countless host of sleeves. Thus, as Morgan points out in an Author's Note at the start of this novel, can tend to change people: "that phrase *strong as steel* has a number of different meanings," he tells us, "and Kovacs is pretty much acquainted with them all." But there is a difference between telling us this and showing it: from all we can see the only effect of being thus strung out is to make Kovacs, and indeed everyone else, that bit more likely to kill, and to kill nastily. The ability to resleeve makes life cheap, yes, but does it have no more positive benefits, does the experience of longer and more varied lives not open up more vistas? These are not eyes that have seen endless lives, only endless deaths.

Storm Front by Jim Butcher
New York: Roc Books, 2000; \$6.99 pb; 336 pages
reviewed by Carol Pinchefsly

The first book in the Dresden Files series, *Storm Front*, by Jim Butcher, is an entertaining synergy of fantasy and mystery, and like any synergy, the combination is greater than the sum of its parts. Though the setting is present-day Chicago, we know we're in a fantasy novel immediately when we learn our hero, Harry Dresden, is a practicing wizard. At the same time we know we're in a hard-boiled detective story too: the dry wit, the impending poverty, the dark and gloom of a coming storm. When you turn the pages, you can hear the velvet sound of a trumpet in a smoky nightclub. If Humphrey Bogart were alive, he would want to play Dresden (but the role would go to Keanu Reeves).

A woman, Monica Sells, wants her missing husband found and gives Dresden some leads. When they next meet, she wants the case dropped, as is dictated by the narrative requirements of a good noir thriller. She is so nervous in fact, that she manages to shake even the pages of the book. Harry's specialist skills make him the only detective for this job: she suspects her husband of using magic, and of worse. Another mystery—a high-priced escort, who works for a vampiress, and her mobster-john are found dead, their hearts torn from their chests. It should surprise no reader that the two mysteries are actually one and the same.

Of course, our hero Harry Dresden is the "only one in the city with the kind of skill required to cast that sort of spell"—a

particularly nasty one at that. As only a high-level wizard can perform it, Harry quickly becomes the prime suspect in the murder mystery he has been hired to solve. The police mistrust him. So does his brotherhood, the White Council. "Even the vampire thinks I've done it," he mutters ruefully.

Plots swirl around each other yet fit together as in a tidy, vast puzzle. Characters and mysteries arrive on Harry's doorstep in a manner according to the rules laid out by the hard-boiled playbook. Butcher takes the formulae of both genres and makes them his own: Harry opens doors for women, not only because it's something men do, but also because it irritates Karrin, the homicide detective. He even has a watcher, but this watcher is no kindly ally. The watcher works for the White Council and perpetually threatens our protagonist with the never-quite-explained Doom of Damocles. This is part of the reason this book is so much fun—we are allowed to imagine the worst.

Part of the reason Harry is a living, breathing character is because we know these few days in Chicago are only a sliver of Dresden's life. He does not live suspended between the pages of a book; he lives whether we read him or not. We believe this when he tosses our lines like, "For reasons I don't have time to get into now, I am marked, indelibly, with the presence of a hunter-spirit." Unlike most hard-boiled detectives, who have ghosts in their pasts, Harry

Somehow this seems such a sorry use for such a wonderful idea.

Yet this is a novel made up of wonderful ideas (and some very fine writing) put to the service of the sort of plot we've grown wearily familiar with over decades of identikit mercenary novels. It is *The Dirty Dozen* or *The Days of War* removed to outer space. There is the same scene where a disparate bunch of lawless characters are recruited for an unusual mission (the only difference this time round is that they are all dead when they are recruited, but as we know, that's not a condition that need detain us long). And there is the same whittling away of the team until one or two alone are left alive. And there is the same denouement where we learn that everyone has betrayed everybody else. The fine detail of these elements may differ from the norm, but the broad pattern recreates the formula precisely.

It's meant to be gritty, hard-edged, tough, a real man's book (there are as many women as men in our pack of mercenaries, but they are mostly men with female names except when they're being screwed). It's the sort of coarse texture where we read quickly to get to the next disembodying. But this crudity is put at the service of a story that has a great deal of delicacy about it. In this future there were aliens. We call them Martians because their enigmatic artifacts were first discovered on Mars, but we really know little about them or where they came from or why they have disappeared. Slowly, over the centuries, archaeologists (why did the perfectly serviceable word "archaeologist" disappear from the language?—but then, Morgan has an idiosyncratic way with language, constantly breaking. Sentences. With full stops when sense does not indicate any punctuation.) have examined these artifacts wherever they have been found, and developed a very imperfect understanding of some of them. Enough, at least, for humanity to follow in the Martian wake across a great swathe of the galaxy. The image of peaceful intellectual exploration this conjures up is at odds with Morgan's vision of vicious war being the eternal lot of mankind, but for now we'll let this pass. But now something completely new has been found, a gateway through which people can be transported instantly to a huge and previously unknown Martian ship out in the depths of space.

The wonder of the unknown, the sense of humanity trying to exploit something they don't begin to comprehend, the feeling that

we don't really belong here in space are all beautifully conveyed. In this, *Broken Angelis* is an example of contemporary science fiction at its best. But whenever intellectual struggle goes on for more than a couple of pages, Morgan seems to lose his nerve and introduce a new threat, or simply kills someone. Thus, where the exploration of, first, the gateway and then the ship, and the gradual understanding of what they might mean for far-stretched humanity, would have made more than enough of a novel for many another writer, Morgan makes it all little more than the McGuffin around which slaughter is done.

This planet is engaged in a vicious civil war, a war engendered and sustained largely by big corporations (this seems to be an *idèle fixe* with Morgan, his most recent novel is another variation on exactly this theme) and fought mostly by off-planet mercenaries. The gateway is, of course, in the middle of a war zone—hence a city is pulverized and Kovacs's team go into the fallout knowing it is going to kill them, but at least they will be relieved later. What's more, Hand, the executive leading this expedition—such an artifact would make his career—has rivals in the same corporation who try to sabotage the expedition by seeding nonweapons of startling ferocity all around Kovacs's camp. Meanwhile the mercenaries that Kovacs left for this little freelance job have got their own interests in what is going on. Oh, and there's at least one traitor in the group indulging in little acts of sabotage. There are more than enough excuses here for someone to shoot someone else if ever the pace should flag.

And when they do finally get through the gateway to the ship, the great revelation is not the sheer oddness of the vessel, nor the discovery of mummified Martians (with a hint that there might still be some still alive). No, it is that the Martians were themselves engaged in an eternal war with some other alien race, a war still being fought now with automatic weapons millennia after the last Martian died. Orwell's vision of the future, a boot grinding into a human face, forever, looks gentle and loving in comparison to Morgan's far-future vistas. Here, across the galaxy and throughout time, there is only war and killing and brutality. Why would we want to have a future if this is all we see of it? ►

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has one that still follows him—He Who Walks Behind. The ghost gets only a fleeting mention, but given that it's book one in a series, I imagine that this fact gets more mileage later.

Harry is a wizard of considerable talent, training, and smarts. At one point, he needs his staff, which is stored in his office eight stories above. He almost summons it but stays his hand when he realizes that the resulting explosion would break through the wall and rain debris on him and all innocent passersby. This isn't dumb fun. Here you find a wizard—and an author—who thinks about the consequences of his actions.

One section smacks of plot convenience, rather than genuine character or situational need. Harry's talking skull (I could explain it, but I won't) refuses to give him the recipe he needs to make a potion of speed unless he also makes a love spell. Why does a talking skull need a love spell? Other than to provide a mix-up and a few good laughs, he probably doesn't. Still, I laughed when the inevitable happened during a date rudely interrupted by a demon. How could I not? Preston Sturges could have written that scene. Another added bonus: This book doesn't take itself too seriously—just seriously enough. For example:

Thirteen wooden columns . . . make it difficult to walk around the place without weaving a circuitous route—they also quite intentionally break up the flow of random energies, dispelling to one degree or another the auras that gather around broody, grumpy wizards and keeping them from manifesting from unintentional and colorful ways.

Jim Butcher is one voice within the burgeoning paranormal-mystery genre. Glen Cook put the genre on the map in 1987 with his detective, Garrett (*Sweet Silver Blues* and others). But unlike the more recent entries in this *genre*, the Dresden Files included, Garrett lives in the city of Tunnafire, a fantastical realm of elves and dwarves. The more recent series are set on modern-day Earth—an Earth vexed by murderous creatures of myth. Laurel K. Hamilton made a name for herself with her Anita Blake Vampire Hunter series (*Gusky Pleasures* and others). Charlene Harris writes mysteries for her telepathic heroine, Sookie Stackhouse, to solve (*Dead Until Dark* and others). Melissa Michaels's protagonist, Rosie Lavine, solves mysteries for the elven community of San Francisco (*Cold Iron* and others).

As adding the paranormal is a twist on the noir theme, these other authors twist the genre even more, by adding romance. Harry Dresden is unlucky in this respect. A sexy reporter flirts with him to get information, but the flirtation is thwarted. A bewitching vampire-madame parades her beauty, but Harry forces her to reveal her hidden, grotesque nature. Harry Dresden may indeed pull several magic tricks out of his hat before the book is finished, but everything else stays in his pants.

Storm Front has no pretensions toward being great literature, but it is intelligently written fun. On a day made dark with the coming of a storm, I can't think of a better book to curl up with. ►

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David V. Griffin
At the Whitney

Longtime readers of this magazine may recall a thoughtful editorial by David G. Hartwell and the editors titled "Who Killed Science Fiction?" (NYRSP #103, March 1997). Although the response to this essay generated a consensus of "Nobody—at least not yet," readers appeared to think that if, not dead, might well be up against the wall. Having spent the last five years working as an arts consultant in New York City, recent events in a very different context have led me to believe that this is indeed the case. SF is up against the wall—the museum wall.

This development is not new. It may be said to date at least from Horace Walpole's essays in Gothic architecture, and it continued through Fuseli, Grandville, and Blake to the freely acknowledged debt that Symbolist painting owed to Poe. A note of fantasy extended even into the circle of the French Impressionists—Degas's "Interior (Le Viol)" of 1866–1870 was thought by many to illustrate a scene from Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, in which a wicked couple are haunted by the vengeful ghost of the woman's murdered husband. As Church patronage declined and Neo-Classical allegory was challenged by the Oxford Movement and the Gothic Revival, painters such as Redon, Moreau, Beardsley, Böcklin, Klimt, and Ryder turned to tales and themes of magic and imagination. Science Fiction per se was less evident as a basis for inspiration, although the Italian Futurists, the Russian Constructivists, and American Art Deco all appear to have drawn upon it to some extent.

The interest was initially mutual. Poe paid homage to the American Luminist painter J. Alden Weir in "Ulalume," where the "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" refers to the painter's mysterious Hudson Valley landscapes. A devilish painter, perhaps an unflattering satire of J. M. Whistler, has a major role in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Zola's *The Masterpiece*, while not overtly a novel of the supernatural, does end with an unforgettable sequence in which the protagonist, an artist working in the suburbs of Paris, is undone by his morbid fascination with a Moreau-like creation. Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*, also not generally classified as a horror novel, makes reference to numerous painters, including Salvatore Rosa, whose Calabrian paintings depict great prospects of unearthly decay. "The Burning of Los Angeles," a large apocalyptic painting featured in West's novel, appears to be a tragic-comic subversion of James Ensor's "Christ's Entry into Brussels 1889," which now hangs, ironically enough, in Los Angeles's Getty Center. Henry James, J. K. Huysmans, H. P. Lovecraft, Mervyn Peake, G. K. Chesterton, Shirley Jackson, and Philip K. Dick, despite differing widely in their aims and effects, were all authors of major influence in the genre who also knew a great deal about art and architecture and incorporated what they knew into their fiction.

And then, on the side of literature, it ended. Why so and how so is beyond the scope of this essay, although I believe that fine art's foray into Abstract Expressionism and attendant movements represented a bold going where no man had gone before that even the New Wave authors were reluctant to follow. The Pop movement continued to play with fantasy subjects, but now it did so in a manner of ironic appropriation, à la Roy Lichtenstein's comics-inspired images and camp explorations such as Andy Warhol's *Dracula*. There were still plenty of SF authors who obviously knew a great deal about art—Thomas M. Disch, Gene Wolfe, Harlan Ellison, Michael Moorcock, Joanna Russ, Bruce Sterling, and Samuel R. Delany all spring immediately to mind—but art itself largely ceased to feature as the subject of the genre novel. There is no ready counterpart in the contemporary genre scene to Wilde's *Picture*, and the only "fine" artist I can think of readily identified with fantasy by those who write it is the painter and sculptor H. R. Giger.

Even as a background device, art is rarely limned in the modern science fiction novel with any clarity of vision, purpose of aesthetic effect. A laudably ambitious novel such as China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* soars when describing interdimensional terrors and stumbles when recounting a conversation at an art gallery party. In one such scene in Miéville's novel, an artist reduces a room to gales of laughter by passing to a friend a note that reads: "You bore me."

Compare that *not* to the glittering satirical nastiness of Mervyn Peake's art-obsessed socialists in the early sequences of *Titus Alone*.

In fact, compare it to the glittering satirical nastiness of New York City's real live art-obsessed socialists. I recently did so myself at the opening of the 2004 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art. And I have news for Jim and Dr. Frankenstein: as far as the Whitney is concerned, SF and fantasy are very much alive.

Again, how so and why so are beyond the scope of this essay. Whitney curator Chrissie Ise refers to Jack Goldstein's "prediction regarding the spectacularization of society" (per Guy Debord) and feels that the works at the Biennial are fraught with "a renewed sense of the apocalyptic." My suspicions are that the collapse of Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and nonfigurative art have proved at once as liberating and as confounding to fine art as was the previous decline of religious and mythological sources. Fantasy provides a ready way for artists to point—and then question—mythic values even as gallery culture gropes its way back toward representational modes.

Whatever the reason, the evidence is everywhere—on the walls of the Biennial, in the catalogue (which featured an excerpt from Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*) and in the statements from the show's curators (Chrissie Ise, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer). What follows is less a critique of the Biennial itself than a review of those artists who seem to represent a new age of Symbolist leanings in American and international art.

The usual high-end visual fixtures were on display, from Robert Longo's charcoal-on-tidal waves (pointlessly ominous), to Taylor Davis's meticulously crafted glass-and-wood constructions. Yet even here a glint of the fantastic was evident. Longo's work, the catalogue informs us, "exists somewhere between cinema, monument, and nightmare," while Taylor's pieces seek to give the viewer the "experience (of) a materializing and dematerializing of structure, architecture, and self." Alas, Longo's titles for the series of works on display—"Dragon Head," "Godzilla," and "Hells Gate"—are derived from surfier culture fare than Japanese B-movies after.

More insidious than Longo's work, but in a similar vein, are the vast canvases of Cameron Martin. The paintings are not quite seascapes or landscapes—they are too simple to be properly called that—but suggest instead images playing under the opening credits for a particularly harrowing thriller. A work not shown, "Untitled CM054," consists of a monochromatic painting of the Paramount Pictures mountain stripped of identifying typography, and those present at the Whitney share the same sense of brooding expectation, excitement, and unease.

The content of such a film was readily suggested by the nearby work by Erik Swenson, "Untitled" (2001). Centered in the room that held the Martin works, the piece consisted of a young deer rubbing its antlers against the nap of an Oriental rug, in the manner by which the animals shed the velvet from their racks. The heightened naturalism of the work (cast entirely in resin) only intensified its dream-like quality, akin to a frozen scene from a David Lynch film.

Elements of great fantastic art surfaced in the gloomy figurative works of Cecily Brown. In "Black Painting 2," a reclining nude woman, rendered in thick, rosy oils, suggests a Francis Bacon-like take on Goya's "The Maja Unclothed." Above the woman, darkness seethes with ulterior life—winged phalli, shadowy faces, barbitric scufflings, all derived from another Goya work, the great "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." Curator Chrissie Ise also finds an affinity between Brown and Fuseli's "The Nightmare." (I remained unconvinced, however, by Ise's arguments that the featherweight portraits on view by Elizabeth Peyton represented a revitalization of the Dorian Grey story. Peyton's surfaces, at least those shown, were too pliant to suggest decay, moral or otherwise.)

Fantasy narratives were more overt in works by Robin O'Neill, Ernesto Caivano, Laylah Ali, David Altmeyer, Herman Bas, and Amy Cutler. O'Neill, a creator of "imaginary worlds," was represented by a large graphite work depicting scores of tiny black-clad figures romping, dawdling, and fleeing through a frozen winter landscape.

Disasters of varying intensity dot the view: here a fallen tree, there a wounded animal. The catalogue noted O'Neill's "science fiction Surrealism" and her interest in "the scary things around every corner." This suggests an affinity with Edward Gorey on the part of the artist, whose enigmatically stoic victims O'Neill's figures resemble.

Calvino's exquisitely detailed ink drawings serve as a correlate to an intensely detailed epic of metaphysical fantasy. The story features a princess transformed into a spaceship, birds that travel through solid matter, a hybrid creature called a "Chevalure" (part goat, sloth, bear, and lion) and an epoch of catastrophe "simultaneously destructive, generative, and transformative." Whatever you may think of this as narrative, there is no denying the lashing, almost Beardsley-like suggestiveness of the images.

In contrast, Amy Cutler's works are closer to gentle children's book illustrations. Inspired in part by "fairy tales, Japanese wood-blocks, and Persian miniatures," among other things, Cutler's gouaches on paper show women engaged in tasks of mundane fabulosity. A colony of beaver-women labor to build a dam; serene kimono-clad ladies demurely mend tiger-striped robes; their eggs atono young girls, pegged out in tent-shaped dresses, have their eggs collected by older women, who are seen leaving, baskets in hand. One is left unsure whether the labors depicted limit or liberate the women enacting them. Possibly this is exactly the point.

Counterpoint to Cutler's understated femininity are Henan Bas's watercolors, which might illustrate a heretofore unknown collaboration between Mark Twain and Jules Verne. Boys float serenely on rafts or fend off oily tentacles, and the figures are rendered in dreamy, muddy lines. Bas's subject is "fog limbo," the state of male pre-adolescent romantic mutuality, and the pictures have a stained and saved look, like mementos of childhood crushes and obsessions.

Beyond illustration and straight into Saturday morning cartoons are Laylah Ali's gouaches, which depict an unexplained war between two races of Martian-like insects (insect-like Martians?). Upon first viewing one might think of the Powerpuff Girls, but Ali's figures, with their ugly, pop-eyed expressions of military hysteria, are unlike to show up on boxes of pre-sweetened cereal any time soon. Ali seeks to explore the basic evils of social and racial inequity by stripping them of familiar human context. I'm not sure that the concept works. Blake Gopnick, writing in the *Washington Post*, dismissed the results as a cartoon. Yet Ali's sharp graphic line would be the envy of many an anime director.

David Altmeyer's work was certainly the most startling of the installations on display. A large construction in mixed media, the work consisted of a half-dozen or so canine skulls (identified by the catalogue as "severed werewolf heads") festooned with what appeared to be human hair. The skulls were incorporated into a crystalline structure of indeterminate origin, which leaked glittering sands in a way that suggested extraterrestrial decay. The end result was amazingly gruesome, nastily redolent of the lycanthropy myth at its most necrotic. This reading was further suggested by the title, "Delicate Men in Positions of Power," indicative of the self-destructive and monstrous qualities of tyranny.

The work was a neat counterbalance to the deer sculpture by Swenson: where Swenson created a sense of unreality through verisimilitude, Altmeyer created a sense of horrific, almost physically nauseating metamorphosis with effects as unnatural as a rubber-finger mask. It was a virtuoso performance, of a sort. I left as quickly as I could.

Equally troubling, if less reviling, was an installation by Mark Handforth. Consisting of a large collapsed interstate highway sign, a crumpled metal star suggestive of a demolished gas station logo, and a fan-shaped arrangement of neon tubes installed on one wall like a motel marquee, the work was arranged in a room that seemed immediately too small for it. One of my companions commented that she would have liked to see the work in a larger space, where its scale could be appreciated. I felt, upon a second visit, that the cramped arrangement suited the installation, which looked like a scene out of Godard's *Weekend* or Paul Bartel's *Dentle Race 2000*. Trapped in close proximity to the enormous heaps of wreckage, viewers were forced to extricate themselves, as if from a violent, slightly futuristic accident. The undeniable sculptural presence of the individual elements was almost a moot point.

Three installations by Virgil Marti, Tom Burr, and an artist's

group called "assume vivid astro focus" dispensed with allusion and kagrogged into pure fantasy itself, creating worlds that existed *in toto* as alternative pleasure zones.

Least successful of the three was Tom Burr's "Blackout Bar," a homage to the all-night gay club culture of the pre-AIDS age. A trash-strewn bar was constructed in a small room at the museum; large black leather flowers, based on wallpaper designs by Andy Warhol, were draped obscenely over upended bar stools. The room symbolized the giddy free-for-all aftermath of the proverbial endless night. But what comes across is more an outtake from *The Blob*, due to the sinister quality of the leather pieces, which looked like otherworldly amebae. Beyond this it might be a bit hard for the viewer to take the nostalgia seriously. Has anyone really ever treasured the memory of waking up under furniture?

Marti's room of mirror-like Mylar panels decorated with crazy loops of faux brocade transported the visitor to Haight-Ashbury via Louis XV's Versailles. (Mylar is often used in marijuana farming; the brocade designs were patterned after the wigs worn by spicers fed drugged flies in a 1970s scientific study.) A large kitschy chandelier of fake Venetian glass, its branches cast after deer antlers, twinkled merrily above. The effect was disarmingly disorienting.

But this giddy chamber of mirrors looked downright Eisenhower Era compared to assume vivid astro focus's spectacular mélange of pop culture orgies. Tucked away from the Whitney's through passages, the walls and ceiling of a lofty room were decked out with 1960s, '70s, and early '80s consumables—an enormous collage of drooling cartoon savages, inflatable B girls, makeup-smeared vixens, and shaggy *Playboy* studs. Two other participating artists, the duo Los Super Elegantes, an attractive man and woman kitted out in Catalina-to-San-Tropez sportswear, were incorporated into the collage in a series of suggestive poses. These poses were repeated as a loop of animated images dancing across a concealed flat-screen television.

An accompanying song performed by Los Super Elegantes, complete with hokey canned applause, served as frank testimony to whiskey, cigarettes, and the pleasures to be derived thereof. The frenetic yet somehow seamless detail, combined with an engagingly deadpan gusto, managed to do what Burr's room did not—suggest a time when sex and partying were pleasurable pursuits rather than grist for the sociopolitical mill. The work would make a great freak room for a high-concept nightclub. But who among today's partygoers could hope to attain the innocent bodily vanity of Los Super Elegantes?

Two more works may be mentioned in the context of this review. I thought them the two best works on display. Perhaps significantly, they were by artists older than most of those selected for the show: Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929) and Roni Horn (b. 1955). The works both contained the word "water" in their title but were otherwise dissimilar save to the degree that they imply not merely the idea but the actual presence of the supernatural.

Kusama's "Fireflies on the Water" consisted of a small room lined with mirrors on all sides, a pool of water in its center. 150 small lights dangled on cords from the ceiling. Visitors entered the room one by one through a door and proceeded onto a gangplank-like runway into the space. The door was shut behind the viewer, and the lights reflected on mirrors and water into what seemed, for a moment, eternal and infinite space. In Japanese folklore, fireflies indicate the presence of ghosts, and Kusama's work, while not quite on par with Mark Rothko's chapel, does exist on a level of spiritual quietude that suggests entry into an otherworld if not the afterlife itself.

Horn's work is more starkly expressed than Kusama's and yet is more difficult to describe. "Doubt by Water" consists of some two dozen double-side photographs, displayed in stands similar to those found in convention centers (holding signs saying "this way to the lobby" and so forth). At the Whitney, the stands were arranged in a seemingly random group, with room enough between them that a viewer could wander through the work. The images displayed were taken from four series of photographs—one showing fog-enshrouded, glacial seas; one showing waters washing over gray sand (a bizarre, almost lunar surface); a series of different birds of prey; and a young boy (perhaps fourteen) shown from his unclothed shoulders up. The artist says that her work is about finding patterns and differentiation in sequences that appear in first glance to be

undifferentiated or completely meaningless—and the pattern that emerged was both terrible and sad.

The boy was at first sight beautiful, but there was a stringy, soiled quality to him. His skin was overly pale and pocked with adolescent pimples; his eyes had dark circles under them; his blonde hair looked unclear. His gaze suggested wariness, if not fear. This was an angel with a very dirty face, that of a teenage runaway and possibly a prostitute. The birds of prey, conversely, were bright-eyed and complete—a hawk, a shrike, a crow, a snowy owl—and they were positioned so that they appeared to be facing the boy throughout the work. As the viewer circled it, there did seem to be a relationship between the boy and the birds, a sort of silent conversation. Might the last image in the sequence be that of the boy, his mouth parted, his face turning away, a slight smile playing over his features, a smile not of trust but of acquiescence? This panel faced a picture of a white owl—the most harmless-looking of the birds shown, but the most destructive in real life. We are certainly back in David Lynch's territory, I think—the owls are not what they seem. If so, the icy waters of the other two series were all too suggestive of where the boy's body will be discovered.

In her introductory essay in the show's catalogue, Chrissie Ilse states that "in formal, psychological, and aesthetic terms, 'Doubt by Water' refuses the possibility of a single reading," so my interpretation may not be correct, or at least it cannot be the only interpretation. But

this evasiveness, which elsewhere would seem a fairly commonplace bit of conceptualist boilerplate, seems wholly apt for an artist whose interest in ambiguity and androgyny is filtered through the concept of the doppelgänger. Iceland has been a source of inspiration to Horn throughout her career, a land where, as Ilse notes, "the world of fairies and ghosts is regarded as a vital parallel world to that of the living." In "Doubt by Water," the world of the living is perhaps more a parallel to that of fairies and ghosts. Horn has created a work that equals Lynch's in stately creepiness while suggesting a reinvention of Poe for an uneasy and unfixed century.

Whether fantasy-inspired works like Horn's will find their way back into a literary dialogue with the genre itself is anybody's guess. It won't be for lack of interest on the part of artists and galleries. It may be for surfeit of interest, however. Artists have not only been generally more omnivorous than the book reviewers at *The New York Times* (cue Darth Vader theme), they have been often more omnivorous than sf fandom. And sf enthusiasts are sometimes surprisingly reluctant to see their favorite metaphors mixed by interlopers. Regardless, there is excellent fantasy-based art to be found at the museums and in the galleries this season. Those who claim to get no respect from Anatole Broyard are getting that and more from West 25th Street. ▶

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Pandora's Star by Peter F. Hamilton

New York: Del Rey Books, 2004; \$26.95 hc; 768 pages

reviewed by David Mead

Peter F. Hamilton, who loves a large canvas, does nothing by halves, even though this is the first part in a two-part novel. Like his landmark trilogy, *Night's Dawn* (*The Reality Dysfunction*, *The Neutronium Alchemist*, *The Naked God*), this new story—composed of *Pandora's Star* and the forthcoming *Judas Unleashed* (2005)—also imagines a vast, complex and growing interstellar community of worlds that discovers a terrible enemy and is utterly, sometimes horrifically, transformed by the encounter.

Here, some hundreds of years from now (ca. 2380 C.E.), explores from the Intersolar Commonwealth, whose curiosity has been drawn to the very strange stellar phenomenon called the Dyson Pair, uncover (literally uncover what has been concealed inside a vast force shield) a very alien, very powerful, very violent enemy living within Dyson Alpha. The entity, a single central immobile consciousness commanding myriad mobile units, attacks, bringing almost unspeakable destruction to the worlds of the Commonwealth. Complicating the Commonwealth's ability to respond effectively to the attack of the alien Primes is the activity of a hidden power called the Starflyer. The Starflyer, another alien being whose very existence is doubted by most humans, may have actually prompted the investigation of the Prime's star system, released the Prime from its cosmic imprisonment, and brought the Commonwealth to the attention of the predatory inhabitant of Dyson Alpha.

As usual, Hamilton conveys a sprawling, multifaceted cosmos through a series of richly detailed episodes that introduce the major players in the drama, start the action, and background the social, political, economic, and cultural life of the Intersolar Commonwealth. The human community he presents consists of hundreds of worlds linked by wormhole gates that allow for rapid travel—by train—across hundreds of light years. The lives of the human inhabitants of the Commonwealth are generally rich and peaceful, they enjoy near-immortality (through cloning, rejuvenation, and mind-storage devices that make bodily death merely an inconvenient interruption of their affairs), a wide range of lifestyles and cultures on many worlds, and almost unlimited opportunity for self-actualization. It is a technologically enabled golden age, although some worry that the pleasures of life have made humanity a little too content, a little soft. While the pretense of representative democratic government is maintained, economic and political life in the Commonwealth is ruled by an oligarchy of super-wealthy patrician families in collaboration with the Sentient Intelligence (SI), a cybernetic entity that evolved out

of the complexities of the cybersphere. Alien life forms and cultures have been met and accommodated, particularly the High Angel—a moon-sized sentient interstellar wanderer that provides habitats for various species, including humans—and the Silfen (the sylphs or fairies of human folklore), who walk the galaxy from world to world along "forest paths," using a technology or magic unknown to humanity. Another alien, the Starflyer, as noted above may not even exist; however, the Guardians of Selfhood, a revolutionary cabal, believe that it is the survivor of the *Marie Celeste*, a crashed interstellar spacecraft, and fear that it is secretly directing the Commonwealth and humanity to complete destruction or enslavement, but most of humanity thinks the Guardians are a lunatic gang of violent terrorists and the Starflyer a figment of their deranged imaginations.

Hamilton's cast of characters is large, as befits an epic tale of interstellar intrigue and warfare, and these are generally believably developed. The most important, at least for now, are Dudley Bose, the astronomer who observes the abrupt concealment of the Dyson Pair behind a mysterious barrier, Wilson Kime, the former NASA astronaut who lives to become the commander of the mission to investigate the Dyson Pair; Nigel Sheldon and Ozzie Isaac, the inventors and owners of the wormhole technology that makes the Commonwealth possible; Paula Myo, a special police detective trying to apprehend the leaders of the Guardians; Bradley Johansson and Adam Elvin, the key Guardians leading the resistance against the Starflyer; Senator Thompson Burnelli, his sister Justine, and his father Gore; Kazimir McFoster, Justine Burnelli's Guardian lover; and Mellanie Rescaoui, a news reporter sleeping her way to the top. They are joined by a large supporting cast.

Much of the first half of *Pandora's Star* is spent pointing these folks in motion and setting up the various plot lines: the exploration of Dyson Alpha and the release of the Primes; Paula Myo's various criminal investigations, particularly the pursuit of Adam Elvin; the cynical machinations of the various political groups as they maneuver to profit from the preparations for war, the search for the perhaps-mythical Starflyer; Ozzie Isaac's walking the Silfen paths. The second half of the book concentrates on the nature and actions of the Primes of Dyson Alpha, and the belated response of humanity to their threat. Here we meet a new character, the Immobile Prime MorningLightMountain, whose triumph over his rivals to be the sole living creature in the Dyson Alpha system leads to his terrible assault on the Commonwealth when the mysterious force shield imprisoning the system vanishes.

Although it takes a while to get the various stories going,

Hamilton brings most of these elements together in some way by the end of the book. That isn't to say that the reader knows just where the stories are going, but we do see that they are beginning to intersect and interact; for example, Paula Mayo has discovered that the Starflyer *does* exist and is influencing both the Commonwealth's political actions and the Guardians' opposition to it. The politicians may be the tools of the Starflyer, which may be more than anyone imagines, perhaps the SI or even a rogue Prime. Many puzzles remain: what's still hidden on Dyson Beta? Where will the Salfen paths lead? What is the SI, really? What is the Starflyer? Will the Commonwealth survive?

Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon by Brian Rosebury

Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; \$19.95 tpb; 246 pages

reviewed by Jenny Blackford

In the introduction to this useful and sensible critical work, Brian Rosebury describes his primary aims for the shorter version that appeared in 1992, with a different subtitle: "It would attempt to assess critically the whole of Tolkien's creative work, and to say at least some new things about it, to identify its most rewarding elements, and to explain what makes them effective." The secondary aims were "to try to free Tolkien from the extremes of fan-club enthusiasm and critical disdain that often accompany best-seller status, and to locate him within literature and within the history of ideas."

These sentences describe fairly precisely what Rosebury has achieved in this new version of the book. Some material has been added, particularly in view of the recent mass-marketing of Tolkien via film, bringing the book to six chapters.

Tolkien: *A Cultural Phenomenon* is unashamedly academic, and should be thoroughly useful for both staff and students working on Tolkien and other fantasy. However, unusually, it is also perfectly accessible for the nonacademic reader.

Rosebury's prose is admirably clear and easy to read, with minimal jargon and no noticeable obfuscation. His lines of argument are also clear and relatively simple to follow. He is genuinely trying to elucidate Tolkien, and, in the process, refuses to sound "impressive" at the expense of clarity.

The following clear, slightly pointed discussion of the Peter Jackson film is typical:

The court of Rohan, for example, is so thoroughly realized, not merely architecturally but in its social distinctions and its atmosphere of political intrigue, that one feels one could stage *King Lear* in it.

Probably the most important section of the book is a long, carefully argued defense of Tolkien's writing style. Many claim to find Tolkien unreadable because of the supposed preponderance of archaic words and convoluted sentence formations. Rosebury works in detail through several long passages from *The Lord of the Rings*, showing that in fact the prose is almost always unusually clear and natural. As he proves, the great majority of the archaic language in *The Lord of the Rings* is used quite deliberately between people who really would talk like that, including elderly, old-fashioned kings, ageless elves who have been alive since the world was made, and others with whom the average reader would seldom converse. Ordinary people in the book—Merry and Pippin for example—talk far more like the average reader would.

Rosebury does not defend Tolkien blindly. He cheerfully admits that there are occasional real stylistic problems. For example, commenting on one unfortunate passage, he states that "one might well wish away the 'lol' and the 'behold!'"

Rosebury also defends *The Lord of the Rings* against the apparently willful misreadings of critics (including Germaine Greer), who impose their own ideologies on it in a manner which makes one wonder if they actually read the work at all. *The Lord of the Rings* has been a Rorschach blot for intellectuals for the last few decades. Rosebury has very carefully researched Tolkien's actual positions on issues of politics, conservation, war, good and evil, and so on; it is wonderful to read him carefully pulling apart other critics' confident

Pandora's Star is a big book and resists fast reading because of its richness of detail (a richness which is a delight and a virtue). Like most "first-half" novels, it will frustrate the reader who, like me, is now caught up in the grand adventure and eager to find out how it all works out. I am glad to recommend it.

Afterthought: I wonder what's in the water in Great Britain that has inspired so many grand old narratives in recent years? What Peveril spring are Iain M. Banks, Stephen Baxter, Alastair Reynolds, Ken MacLeod, Paul McAuley, and Peter Hamilton drinking from? ▶

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assertions with what certainly seem to be the facts. His understanding of Tolkien's ideas and beliefs seems closer to the real writer than that of any other critic I have read.

Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon is excellent on Tolkien and landscape, which Rosebury has convinced me is important in understanding all of Tolkien's work, including *The Lord of the Rings*. He makes an excellent case for the position that "Middle-earth, rather than any of the characters, is the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*."

On a larger topic, he states:

If *The Lord of the Rings* stands at a tangent to the novel as a genre, it is not because of a general abstention from realism or archaism of style—neither of which can really be attributed to it—but because of a highly specific feature for which precedents are hardly to be found in the novel tradition: the complex and to an extent systematic elaboration of an imaginary world.

This may well be the correct answer to many years of questioning about the position of *The Lord of the Rings* in the world of literature.

Adding to its usefulness for academic readers, Rosebury quotes and paraphrases a large number of secondary sources, providing what seem to be sensible judgments of them. In particular, he often quotes or otherwise uses Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth*, almost always with approbation. There is also a handy list of Further Reading (and Listening) before the Notes, providing useful information, including hints and value judgments, about secondary material.

The new final chapter concentrates on Tolkien's recently increased popularity, which has come about mainly as a result of Peter Jackson's excellent films. Tolkien has now fully entered the commercial world, and Middle-earth is permeating popular culture in bizarre ways, from card, board, and computer games to Advent calendars (surely the strangest manifestation of the craze). This chapter certainly justifies the book's new subtitle, "A Cultural Phenomenon."

In the last chapter, as well as discussing the films and other adaptations, he deals with the flood of sub-Tolkien fantasy that has submerged the reading world since *The Lord of the Rings* became a commercial success. Is any publisher's blurb on the back cover of a book more inclined to make the heart sink than "As good as Tolkien"? With typical fairness, however, he notes that writers like Garner and Pratchett have used Tolkien's example in an intelligent manner, learning from it and producing something new, rather than writing inferior copies.

My only quibble with the book is that Rosebury may be a touch over-enthusiastic about both *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien's poetry. However, this is a small issue; *de gustibus non disputandum* (there's no accounting for tastes). I found myself almost always in agreement with Rosebury over the larger questions of the great virtues and small vices of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Overall, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* is accessible, sensible, and full of information and critical judgments. It should be very useful for students and academics of fantasy in general, or *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, as well as the general, intelligent, interested reader. ▶

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"Pre-Uterine Claims": Cultural Contexts and Iconographic Parallels in Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*

James Graham Ballard wrote the original version of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) as stories in the tumultuous years of 1966–1969. During this period, Ballard was making the transition from his natural-disaster novel phase of the early 1960s to what would later become his technological disaster phase in *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High Rise* (1975), with a new focus on the city landscape. Of his novels, *The Atrocity Exhibition* can be seen as the most distinctive and experimental by virtue of its unusually dense narrative and fringed structure. The content of the novel consists almost entirely of popular iconography, with the seeming purpose of performing an in-depth analysis of the nature of contemporary reality and its relationship to the mass media.

Seductive, notorious, and challenging, *The Atrocity Exhibition* is living testimony to the twentieth century's journey through hell. The novel chronicles the experiences of a psychiatrist who is having a mental breakdown, brought on by his refusal to accept the basic facts of his existence. His goal, to restage the assassination of President Kennedy "in a way that makes sense," reflects his dream to create a better world and to infuse meaning into an apparently futile world dominated by the mass media. As in many of Ballard's novels, the disaster scenario enables the author to portray the human psyche in extreme situations. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the extreme situation is our everyday lives: our consciousness, the postures of our bodies, the media. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is an all-encompassing and encyclopedic work that attempts to give a precise portrait of the cultural landscape of the years in which it was written. It is consciously modern and has a political aspect aimed at uncovering the "hidden agendas" Ballard had identified during that era; its experimental form is a reflection of the experimental time the book was written, a new, visionary work of art reflecting the changing attitudes and situations of the times, which for Ballard, had fundamentally changed the role of the novelist.

Ballard's main preoccupation in the majority of his novels and short stories is the world in which we live. In the introduction to *The Complete Short Stories* (2001), Ballard explains how he was "interested in the real future I could see approaching, and less in the invented future that science fiction preferred," a fiction set "in a kind of visionary present—a description that fits the stories in this book and almost everything else I've written" (ix). *The Atrocity Exhibition* fulfills this ambition perhaps more than any other text Ballard has written. Many of the events in the novel reflect the unprecedented changes in the lives of people in the Western world at the time, the effects of which are felt to this day: the rise of the mass media, the rise of the consumer society and mega-cities, more tolerant attitudes to sex, etc. In this sense, the novel explores post-WWII realities through the common experiences that have come to characterize contemporary life.

Ballard's focus on the world of the present reflects an urgency to create an art that has an immediate relationship with the outside world. In the 1980s, Ballard stated:

Science fiction should be concerned with the here and now, not with the far future but with the present, not with alien planets but with what was going on in the world in the mid-'50s. I still feel this, of course, but it was even truer then than it is now, because the world we live in now was being born in the postwar period. (R/S 121)

The Atrocity Exhibition is Ballard's greatest attempt at creating an in-depth and all-encompassing portrait of contemporary life. It is different from *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High Rise* by virtue of its generality and its wide-ranging scope. Whereas his three following novels examine specific aspects of contemporary life, i.e., the culture of the automobile, the freeway, and the high rise, *The Atrocity Exhibition* examines the city landscape as a whole. In this sense, *The Atrocity Exhibition* is Ballard's most philosophically revealing work, shedding light on many of the underlying principles that run throughout all his novels.

To understand the conceptual background of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, one has to examine Ballard's particular view of science fiction, which requires an awareness of his unique perspective on Modernism. Ballard's essay, "The Innocent as Paranoid," published in *New Worlds* magazine in 1969, elucidates many of the characteristics Ballard considers to be the major hallmarks of the modern artist. Although the essay is focused on Salvador Dalí, Ballard uses the occasion to present conceptual and theoretical background to what he sees as the defining characteristics of modern art-making. Ballard explains how his view is different from the more traditional view, often defined by its "sense of individual isolation, its mood of introspection and alienation," found in "the literary tradition running from Baudelaire to Rimbaud through Joyce and Eliot to Hemingway and Camus, to name a few landmarks" (92). According to Ballard, the works of these writers largely reflect a rejection of the nineteenth-century mindset: "[A] reaction against the monolithic phallic character of Victorianism, against the tyranny of the paterfamilias, secure in his financial and sexual authority, and against the massive constraint of bourgeois society" (92–3). For Ballard, much of the modern artist's function is to provide an imaginative response to the factors that influence modern subjectivity on a mass scale, "the first flight of the Wright brothers, the invention of the pill, the social and sexual philosophy of the ejector seat," major scientific and technological advances which have fundamentally distinguished the twentieth-century experience from its predecessor (93).

Ballard finds that the true spirit of the twentieth century is captured by its science fiction writers, with their interest in science and technology. By virtue of its concepts and vocabulary alone, so heavily influenced by science and technology, Ballard viewed science fiction as the ideal arena to seriously extrapolate on the present and near future. In "The Innocent as Paranoid" he states:

Already one can see that science fiction, far from being an unimportant minor offshoot, in fact represents one of the main literary traditions of the twentieth century, and certainly its oldest—a tradition of imaginative response to science and technology that runs in an intact line through Wells, Aldous Huxley, the writers of modern American science fiction, and such present day innovators as William Burroughs and Paoletti (92)

Ballard's claim that science fiction is "one of the main literary traditions of the twentieth century" is grounded in the fact that the genre itself is a product of the modern world. As a result, the portrayal of characters and their relationships in the science fiction genre mark a significant departure from the depictions often found in naturalistic novels, represented by Henry James, for example. Ballard examines how the transformation of the external world at the behest of science and technology has affected the inner landscape of our minds. Inevitably, external transformations affect the nature of our social relationships, as well as our individual relationship with the world as a whole; hence, for Ballard, the role of the novelist is to adequately and honestly reflect these transformations in an accessible way modern people can relate to.

According to Ballard, the true modern artist is a kind of naïve, whose view of the world is as much determined by the imagination as by the external world. At first, characterizing the modern artist as a kind of naïve sounds paradoxical, and it has been the source of confusion for literary critics. In "The Innocent as Paranoid," Ballard explains how naïveté is a character trait that has manifested as a reaction to the strange and ambiguous world we inhabit:

I regard Dalí, like Wells and the writers of modern science fiction, as true naïves, i.e., those taking imagination and reality at their face value, never at all sure, or for that matter concerned, which is which. In the same category I place many other notable originals, such as William

Burroughs—certainly a naïve, with his weird delusions, possibly correct, that *Time Magazine* is out to subvert our minds and language—and Andy Warhol, a fun-like naïve of the media landscape, using communications, cinema and colour reproduction processes, for his own innocent and child-like amusement. (97)

In *Science Fiction Studies* volumes 18 and 19 (1991–92), a group of essays attempts to assess Jean Baudrillard's essay "Ballard's Crash." SFS reprints two essays by Baudrillard from *Simulacra and Simulations* on the relationship between simulation and science fiction, which is commented upon in a series of essays by scholars who analyze Baudrillard's essays in relation to Crash. This is followed by a response by Ballard himself, "A Response to the Invitation to Respond," where Ballard accuses an "overprofessionalized academia . . . of rolling its jaws over an innocent and naïve fiction that desperately needs to be left alone" ("A Response" 329). In volume 19, Nicholas Ruddick criticizes Ballard's statement: "Surely Ballard cannot be suggesting that his own fiction is 'innocent and naïve,' and not worth serious critical examination? Was there ever a work of fiction that is less 'innocent and naïve' than *Crash*?" ("Ballard/Crash/Baudrillard" 355–6). "The Innocent as Paranoic," parts of which I've described in this paper, clears up Ballard's unusual use of the word "naïve."

In a world dominated by the bizarre and a media landscape that seems to reflect, in some way, however distorted, mass consciousness, the inner world of the dream and the outer world of reality seem more intertwined than ever before, and with the advent of virtual reality, one can expect this conflation to increase. For Ballard, the importance of these artists is in their ability to negotiate the images that reside between the world of our imaginations and the world outside, thus helping us understand a world where fiction and non-fiction are no longer mutually exclusive categories.

Another important characteristic of Ballard's modernism is honesty. To a large extent this is Ballard's main defense for the more controversial aspects of his work. One of the main themes of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is the sensationalizing of violence. Ballard chose the assassination of John F. Kennedy as the central image depicting this new aspect of the media in the mid-1960s. Ballard speculates on taboo subjects, such as the notion that the psyche derives satisfaction from car crashes: "the car crash may be perceived unconsciously as a fertilizing rather than a destructive event—a liberation of sexual energy . . ." (2—"Transliterated Pucenda"). He also examines the voyeuristic pleasures of the televised portrayal of soldiers' deaths in the Vietnam war: "What our children have to fear are not the cars on the freeways of tomorrow, but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths" (8—"Biomorphic Horror"). The real, or unconscious, feelings that many people have and refuse to acknowledge or confront in themselves, no matter how unpleasant, overrides the offensive nature of the concepts, as Ballard is interested in uncovering our true natures. In a 1986 book review for the *Guardian*, Ballard explains how he sees this as an important aspect of Dali's work: "[Dali] was prepared to accept the logic of psychoanalysis and brave enough to enter areas where many of the surrealists became squeamish: castration, voyeurism, onanism, and coprophilia. This complete frankness and readiness to exploit himself mark Dali out as a true modern" (100). Ballard promotes the notion that once people begin to deal honestly with their real nature and imaginative experience, society will be more equipped to resolve and prevent the very things which disturb people so deeply in Ballard's work, such as car crashes and wars.

Ballard's unconventional take on science fiction has always made his place ambiguous. Some don't think of his work as science fiction at all, while others consider him one of the leading figures of the genre. In the editorial introduction to *Science Fiction Studies* volume 18, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay calls Ballard an exemplary representation of postmodern science fiction:

A genre born in oxymoron, like the Chinese Stone Monkey, sf has always relied on drastic combinations of incongruous categories presented as if they were truly capable of embodiment. This tendency of sf has reached a pinnacle with postmodernism, articulated in J.G. Ballard's introduction to the French edition of *Crash*, the *de facto* founding manifesto

of postmodern sf. (306)

One of the elements that make Ballard's vision of science fiction distinctive is the importance he places on Surrealist art and practices. In *The Drowned World* (1961) and *The Burning World* (1962), Ballard references paintings by Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst, Paul Delvaux, Salvador Dali, and Yves Tanguy, demonstrating a committed appreciation for the visual arts from the beginning of his career. For Ballard, Surrealism and science fiction perform similar functions, which he describes in a 1963 essay for *The Woman Journalist*, "Time, Memory and Inner Space:"

In many respects this fusion of past and present experiences, and of such disparate elements as the modern office buildings of central London and an alligator in a Chinese zoo, resembles the mechanisms by which dreams are constructed, and perhaps the great value of fantasy as a literary form is its ability to bring together apparently unconnected and dissimilar ideas. To a large extent all fantasy serves this purpose, but I believe that speculative fantasy, as I prefer to call the more serious fringe of science fiction, is an especially potent method of using one's imagination to construct a paradoxical universe where dream and reality become fused together, each retaining its own distinctive quality and yet in some way assuming the role of its opposite, and whereby an undeniable logic black simultaneously becomes white. (200)

Possibly, this echoes Filby's skepticism in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*: "You can show black is white by argument," said Filby, "but you will never convince me." One of Ballard's challenges to sf writers is to make apparently impossible concepts convincing, and generally he achieves this by placing fantastic events in a psychological context.

According to Ballard's vision, science fiction, like Surrealism, is an attempt to bridge the gap between the inner landscape of the soul and the external world of reality, which has changed drastically. This ability to negotiate the bizarre images inside the psyche with objects from the external world of physical reality is what makes the techniques and subject matter of Surrealism and science fiction complementary to one another. The value of these genres lies in that they question our basic assumptions, thus helping us to come to a deeper understanding beyond the conventional notions of what we generally think of as constituting reality.

Throughout the narrative of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard also references the Pop artists, perhaps the main source of inspiration for the novel. Ballard visited the now famous 1956 exhibition, *This is Tomorrow*, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. This was the first Pop art exhibition, and it established many of the themes that would preoccupy the Pop artists in the years to come. Interest in the world of the present and the role of technology, criticism, violence, and consumerism in the mass media and everyday life were of mutual interest for Ballard and helped inspire the direction of his writing, particularly in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In a 1980s interview with *Reservoir Publications*, Ballard stated:

Here for the first time was an art actually about what it was like to buy a new refrigerator, what it was like to be in a modern kitchen, what modern fabrics and clothes and mass advertising is about, the whole world of the communications landscape: TV, radio and movies. I mean, the Pop artists (and Pop is an unfortunate term to describe them) were taking the world they lived in seriously, at its own terms. I thought the SF writer needed to do the same, to get away from interplanetary travel and time travel and telepathy and all this nonsense. (R/S 121)

The Pop artists' preoccupation with the way advertising and the media were transforming the world encouraged Ballard to become even more engaged with contemporary subject matter. Thus, the convergence between Surrealism and science fiction mentioned previously later came to include Pop art as well, as he explains in his 1971 essay, "Fictions of Every Kind":

The subject matter of science fiction is the subject matter of everyday life: the gleam on refrigerator cabinets, the

contours of a wife's or husband's thighs passing the newsreel images on a colour TV set, the conjunction of musculature and chromium artefact within an automobile interior, the unique postures of passengers on an airport escalator—all in all, close to the world of the Pop painters and sculptors, Paolozzi, Hamilton, Warhol, Wesselmann, Ruscha, among others. (207)

In *The Atrocity Exhibition* objects and, more generally, our external surroundings act as evidence of inner realities, a way of exploring and examining the unique psychology of the last half of the twentieth century. In the introduction to the 1974 French edition of *Craab*, Ballard explains the importance of a contemporary vocabulary to making relevant art: "Science and technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages or remain mute" (97). Content alone, however, is insufficient to characterize a work as being Pop and produces "illogical groupings" as Robert Rosenblum explained in his essay, "Pop Art and Non-Pop Art": "If Pop Art is to mean anything at all, it must have something to do not only with what is painted; but also with the way it is painted; otherwise, Manet's *die borbies*, Van Gogh's flags, and Balla's automobiles would qualify as Pop Art" (54). Lichtenstein's use of Ben-Day dots, the billboard technique of James Rosenquist, and Warhol's repeating images are classic examples of art that reflects industrial production. The structure of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is also technological. The serial format of the titled sections has the look of an unspooled film negative. There are also significant structural resemblances in the novel to Max Ernst's collage novels made from rearranged woodcuts taken out of Victorian novels. Ballard also uses the unemotional language of the scientist to tell his story, and the classification structure of the medical textbook, juxtaposing the language and structure of scientific texts onto the traditional novel. This is a quality he sees in Dalí's work as well, arguing that it makes the most sense to use contemporary structures to represent the contemporary world: "Dalí's work demonstrates that surrealism, far from being a gratuitous dislocation of one's perceptual process, in fact represents the only reasonable technique for dealing with the subject matter of the century" (95).

In various essay and interviews, Ballard also states the importance of what he calls "the invisible literature," e.g., faxes, office memos, pamphlets, and advertising slogans. Similar to the importance the Surrealists and Pop artists placed on common objects and the general axiom that the more banal an object is the more psychic weight it has, Ballard utilizes the constituent parts and detritus of modern life as fodder for his writing:

market research reports, pharmaceutical company house magazines, the promotional copy for a new high-energy breakfast food, journals such as *Psychological Abstracts* and the Italian automobile magazine *Style Auto*, the internal memoranda of TV company planning departments, sex manuals, U.S. Government reports, medical textbooks . . . bizarre verbal collages taken from fashion magazines, weapons, technology, stock market reports and so on. (R/S 156)

Many of the books Ballard considers most influential to his work could be included in this list, such as *The Warren Commission into the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, as well as a book called *Craab Injuries*, which he refers to as his "bibles" in a 1982 interview (Vale & Juno, "Interview," 10). Again, this demonstrates Ballard's absolute concern with the world of the present. Using these and other documents, Ballard charts the contemporary iconography of inner space; again, much like the Surrealists did with furniture, food, and architecture, among other things. The conscious valuing of society's refuse and knock-knacks as a means for creating art can be found as early as in the works of Arthur Rimbaud. Near the beginning of "Alchémie of the Word," Rimbaud writes:

I had a taste for absurd paintings, the signs above doorways, stage scenery, the backdrops used by strolling players, inn-signs, cheap coloured prints; unfashionable literature, church Latin, erotic books with spelling mistakes, novels our

grandmothers read, fairy-tales, little books for children, old operas, meaningless refrains, obvious rhythms. (31)

An even more direct use of society's refuse can be found in Lautréamont's apparent use of a textbook on ornithology to describe the flight of birds at the beginning of *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Paul Knight states:

This does not reduce the literary effect, and the image loses none of its force for not being a part of Lautréamont's own experience; the original on which this passage might have been based is completely transformed by its inclusion here. Lautréamont, himself the most original of writers, expresses contempt for the obsession with originality and even says, in the *Poème* that "plagiarism is necessary" (*Maldoror and Poème* 13-14).

William Burroughs is another famous example of a writer who cut together items such as newspapers, pamphlets, as well as the works of major writers such as Rimbaud and Conrad in the process of creating his fictions.

By using the contents of modern life itself as his source material, Ballard, like many other modern artists, lowers the threshold between art and life. In other words, their artworks are much more firmly rooted in a common experience of reality, and in Pop art in particular, in the reality of the mass media shared by everyone. Ballard's "The Mammoplasty of Mae West" and "Princess Margaret's Face Lift" in the appendix of *The Atrocity Exhibition* are extreme examples. In these pieces, which Ballard has taken from real medical textbooks, he simply replaces "the patient" with the names of Mae West and Princess Margaret. Ballard explains how this small juxtaposition transforms the entire piece "as if the literature and conduct of science constitute a vast dormant pornography waiting to be woken by the magic of fame" (note 1 to "Princess Margaret's Face Lift"). It is also significant that Ballard is using a real scientific text at the end of a major work of art, perhaps demonstrating an even greater vision, converging the written word and the visual image with the vocabulary of the sciences.

The placing of importance on writing about the present is not a new concept, but perhaps it is a modern one. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Charles Baudelaire wrote, "The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due, not only to the beauty it can be clothed in, but also to its essential quality of being the present" (391). The present is important because it presents us, a portrait of our own psychology. What is our situation? Where do we stand? What is going on around us? Who are we? Far from a self-indulgent exercise, these are the central concerns of our time, as they should be for any other. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard asks first of all, what is going on? And second, how do we make it meaningful and, perhaps, even moral? Art is that much more interesting when it informs this very moment, as it helps us understand our current situation more fully, and enables us to make better choices in the creation of the future.

The Atrocity Exhibition shows Ballard at his boldest and most enigmatic, an unrestrained, no holds barred portrayal of the bells of modern consciousness. The passion, conviction, and honesty of the novel is reflected by the protagonist, Traven, a doctor trying to infuse purpose, through his imagination, in what looks to be a meaningless universe. Traven's attempt to come to grips with the major issues of his day through the sexual imagination is not a pessimistic vision, but a vision of hope; an attempt to first confront the problem in an honest fashion, and out of which form imaginary solutions, using the power of the imagination itself as the greatest weapon against the cold meaninglessness of a world that has ceased to feel. ▀

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The Zenith Angle by Bruce Sterling
 New York: Del Rey, 2004; \$24.95 tpb; 320 pages
 reviewed by James L. Cambias

It's an old debate but it never quite dies. What is science fiction? Bruce Sterling's new novel *The Zenith Angle* is certain to rekindle the debate. The promotional material accompanying the book calls it a "technothriller" and refers to Sterling himself as a novelist and futurist. The words "science fiction" do not appear in the press release that came tucked inside the review copy. Sterling also calls *The Zenith Angle* a technothriller in his weblog.

Let's dispose of one thing right away. *The Zenith Angle* is not a technothriller, whatever Bruce Sterling says. (What does he know? He's just the author.) Anyone who picks it up expecting a Tom Clancy or Dean Koontz-style action-adventure story will be gravely disappointed. There are exactly two action scenes in the entire book, and one of them is a fistfight between two computer programmers.

To be fair, the book is about people working for a supersecret government agency fighting a dastardly plot straight out of a James Bond novel. But the focus of the story isn't the hows of tracking terrorists, or even the whys. It's how all this affects one nerdy computer security specialist named Derek "Van" Vandever, and whether his marriage will survive the stress of conflicting careers. And ultimately those are the things the reader is most interested in. In a more orthodox airport-bookshop technothriller, the hero's shaky marriage would be a meaningless character tag, and the emphasis would be on how he and his comrades Save the World from the villain's dastardly plot.

Having the heroes Save the World is a cheap way to keep the reader interested in the outcome. It's far more challenging to have the heroes doing something less important and still make the reader care. Sterling set himself up with a difficult dilemma: his subject (counterterrorist operations in the wake of September 11) naturally lends itself to world-saving, but I suspect he wanted to avoid that. The result is that the action climax of the book may strike many readers as distinctly anticlimactic. The villain's superweapon isn't defeated by the daring cybercommandos but by, essentially, the invisible hand of the marketplace.

Anyone who has read Bruce Sterling's recent nonfiction book *Tomorrow Now* and his earlier *The Hacker Crackdown* will recognize a lot of elements drawn from his parallel career as a cyberjournalist. All his interests are on display: computer crime and security, high-tech entrepreneurs, cutting-edge military and spy technology, and the gray areas where special operations overlap with organized crime.

So is *The Zenith Angle* a political novel, then? Certainly Sterling's inside knowledge informs the book's politics. But despite the fact that it takes place in 2002 and is specifically about some very hot current issues, it's surprising how little overt political content the book actually has. Of course, some readers may try to find a message in that very lack: if he doesn't show Federal law enforcement agents as jackbooted thugs or clean-cut defenders of America, which side is he on?

The simple fact is that Sterling doesn't seem interested in writing a polemic; instead he's showing us these guys as they are. Derek Vandever and his gung-ho partner Michael Hickock are perfectly willing to send computer hackers to a steel cage at Guantanamo

without due process—but Sterling makes the reader understand and maybe even sympathize with their impatience and frustration. This is certainly a wise choice, since the vast majority of polemics become outdated faster than you can say "news cycle."

So if it isn't a technothriller or a spy novel or a political thriller, what is it? I'd say that *The Zenith Angle* belongs to the same subgenre as Neal Stephenson's *Zodiac* and *Cryptonomicon*, Sterling's own *Zeitgeist*, or William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*. Call it "Hard Slipstream Fiction," or maybe just "Geek Fiction." They bring a science fiction sensibility to parts of the real world, simply because those parts of the real world are so utterly science-fictional that any other approach wouldn't be able to depict them. As so many self-congratulating sf writers have pointed out since about 1945, our society is becoming a science fiction world. At first this simply meant that they got the details of upcoming technologies right, or maybe even saw some of the consequences of those technologies before everyone else noticed.

Geek Fiction turns the whole process around. Instead of trying to extrapolate future technologies and future worlds, it uses the techniques of sf to depict and explain the contemporary world (or even the past, in Stephenson's case). All the tools that sf writers developed over the years, all the ways of depicting the fantastic as real and ordinary, turn out to be just as useful when the real and ordinary gets fantastic.

The Zenith Angle isn't flawless. The ending seems rushed, and at times the tension between gonzo Sterlingsque fiction and solid Sterlingsque fact produces visible fracture lines. Some of the plot elements may be simply too subtle and only become apparent on a second or third reading. But as a harbinger of future Geek Fiction it is an intriguing and groundbreaking novel. It will be interesting to see if the marketing gambit of avoiding the sf label pays off and brings it to the attention of a wider audience, or whether the bookstore will simply put it on the shelf in the ghetto next to Sterling's other work. It will also be interesting to see whether that matters at all.

There is one final question about how to define *The Zenith Angle*. As already mentioned, it features a lot of Sterling's inside knowledge of how computer law enforcement and counterterrorism really works. One of the minor characters in the novel is a computer security specialist who started out as a cop and gets called in to run a Federal cybersecurity task force in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. In the final chapter, we hear in passing that he has taken a job as chief of security with eBay. Shortly after finishing reading the review copy of Sterling's novel I ran across a *Wall Street Journal* article about How and Schmidt, the new chief of security with eBay. He started out as a cop and then got called in to run a Federal cybersecurity task force in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Mr. Schmidt even matches the physical description of the character in the novel. So perhaps the real question about *The Zenith Angle* is not whether or not it is science fiction, but whether it is fiction at all. ►

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Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years by Bruce Sterling

New York: Random House, 2003; \$13.95 tpb; 334 pages

reviewed by Damien Broderick

I think Bruce can be characterized as a journalist who likes working around the edges of the new, revolutionary ideas... he's full of manic energy. He's out there with a machine gun of ideas spewing bullets in all directions, and he tends to hit an awful lot of targets head on.

—Charles Stross, *Loose*, August 2003

Back in the day, I suggested that the first novel by Charlie Stross's sometime collaborator Cory Doctorow was a prime instance of *Blogpunk*, a tooth-grating neologism that deserves a nonfiction partner. Bruce Sterling's futurist writing (I'm explicitly not addressing his sf now) is a form of *Blogpunk*, and *Tomorrow Now* really can be read only as an instance of this short attention span assemblage idea-tumble format. It's sassy, knowing, with short sharp jabs of wit and facts, tied together (between, as it were, cool sips at the glass or hotlink twitches at the mouse) by a laconic, sardonic delivery that's more stand-up comic than Toffler Associates trouble found snuffler noising after the future shock drivers of social change.

His narrative device for holding this explosion inside one heaving skin is Shakespeare's seven ages of Man, from *As You Like It*: infant, student, lover, soldier, mature magistrate, aging scholar, senescent old fart. Within this cyclic trajectory, already warped considerably from Shakespeare's paradigm as well-fed, exercised, secure Boomers make 60 the new 40, his sharply observed anecdotes, *obiter dicta*, case studies, and artful self-revelations tell us that things will change (and how! but not how, which is unknowable), yet not that much. Why, otherwise, regale us (fascinatingly) with a 50 page digression on three insurgent thugs—Shameel Bassey, Khortab, and Arkan? In a real blog, this would mark a week's abrupt obsession, or a sideways link to a site on paramilitary tactics in the epoch of the cellphone. It doesn't have anything much to do with futurist analysis except, perhaps, to insist that tomorrow will be just like today, only different, yet not that much.

It's a book made, in a way, of digressions and asides.

Here's the Bruce-ster on how money moves away:

[W]henver some upcity national government politically restricts some activity in the name of its people... The money goes, but you don't get to follow it. If you could, then the money would have no reason to run; it would have to sit where it was with a sense of grim resignation. The money is running from you—from you and your decisions that affect its interests. (191–2)

This is funny, astute, cynical, and soundbitey all at once. It reminds me of a *Wired* version of "Adam Smith," the charming money explainer of the 1970s who told us ignore the sorry saga of pork belly futures, random walkers, chartists and frequentists, and the wily corporate accountants who paved the way for Enron a quarter century later. Sterling promises us glimpses of the coming half-century, but most of his spiky, jittery book deals with the now, the now of a very smart guy whose tendrils quiver with the beat of the nospere and who finds to his delight (one imagines) that "vaporous rantings" are suddenly, in a climate where intellectual property smells sweeter than frankincense, myrrh, and gold, as good as platinum plastic, that "what used to be sophomoric philosophizing around a pizza and a pitcher suddenly became a valuable exchange of marketable information" (223–4). So too, even on the far margins of the real money (surging on its toes in its fantastically over-designed and hyper-featured GPS-detecting escapologist's Pumas), that "when April 15 rolls around, I can see, with wide-eyed incredulity, that I command more revenue and resources than 99 percent of this planet's population" (213). Naturally, this is an unseemly confession, and Sterling quickly points out, drawlingly, that "If I were to cut and paste my latest 1040 tax form onto the page here, it would be far worse and

more shocking than posting nude pics of myself on the Internet" (216).

Of course, Sterling is not filthy rich, he's insufficiently obsessed for that, or at least his obsessions, blogishly, keep changing. He's too interested in the varicosities of the ever-changing world, and simultaneously in the slow, regular, Shakespearean transitions of his life as family man. It is somehow shocking to realize that the Brucester is half a century old this year, nearly as astounding as the idea that sf's cantankerous *enfant terrible*, Harlan Ellison, turned 70 this May. Will either of them make it far into the next 50 years? It's conceivable that Sterling will, if he socks some of his money away sensibly, and drastic change continues to roll, to accelerate.

Curiously, at a time when a Vingean technological Singularity is still often the rage in sf (if only as a Large Terrible Obstacle to be skirted as amusingly as one can manage), Sterling dismisses the prospect. His method of avoiding such a cataclysm of blocked prediction, of futurist opacity, is intriguingly double: it won't happen (or won't be such a big deal if it does), and when it does happen it'll just be the first of ever more "rapid, massive explosion[s] of following Singularities" (297).

Can both these dicta be correct? Yes, when viewed through jaded mirrorshades. We or our descendants might be posthuman, but it won't do anyone any good because "the posthuman condition is banal... By the new, post-Singularity standards, posthumans are just as bored and frustrated as humans ever were... still quotidian entities in a gritty, rules-based physical universe... swiftly and bruisingly brought up against the limits of their own condition..." (297). We might have life extension, even recovered youth (as in his splendid novel *Holy Fire*), but it will be granted piecemeal and cost plenty in dollars and pain. It's a curiously mid-twentieth century picture of dolorous surgery and uncertain healing, even though for Sterling last century's blind spot was filled rather with gleaming chrome, effortless machinery, and slick Stepford social engineering—as well as the looming certainties of MAD's "sudden and total flaming extermination," an "exciting sense" that we perversely enjoyed for its "mythic resonance" (259). What Sterling denies explicitly and by repeated implication is that the next fifty years can be anything other than a continuation of the current ontology by other means.

To suppose otherwise, he claims, is to fall into a nerdish, geeky, digeratiish delusion that computers and their numerical algorithms can rupture history's chaotic wanderings through the state space we humans have constructed for ourselves in the long, 250,000-year, nature-dendating catastrophe of the Sixth global Extinction. I'm not the most objective critic of this position, having so firmly staked my own assessment, in two pop-sci futurist books and several novels, upon the likelihood of an impending Singularity that a NTRSF reviewer called it my *idiot fixe*. It's not quite that, but I share with quite a few of writers this working premise: Stross's Eschaton and accelerating, Egan's Introsol, Banks's Sublime, Williams and Dix's Spike, MacLeod's and Vinge's Frank Singularity, my own Spike or Transcension...

Is this no better than the cognitive Monkey Puzzles Sterling warns us futurists against in his 2003 Afterword? The coconut is stuck to a greedy primate's clenched fist: "You know, on me, this thing looks great!" (319). It's an appealing, appalling image, echoed in its own mirror by a host of previous very silly obsessions and delusions in the genre: flying saucers, *déjà vu* from Lemuria skulking under the crust, dianetics, psi machines, unidirectional thrust from the Dean Drive, astrological radio interference, messages from archaic space probes... "Only recently," Sterling confesses, "did I become pretty sure that I have already had, in my life to date, at least four of them" (320). Cyberpunk ("the movement") was the most prominent; hacker anxiety perhaps another. Is his homespun Viridian movement a Monkey Puzzle? Other sf writers might find

their own temptation in cryonics, nanotechnology, libertarian or socialist utopianism, Galan religiosity, greenhouse activism, revived nuclear power. The difference, I argue, is that the Singularity perspective is not absurd, counterintuitive, wistful, rapturous, or supernatural. It's just what seems to be happening with the pace, compression, and convergence of key technologies. Not all, of course. Just the driving information generators and handlers.

In a recent talk to the Long Now Foundation, though, Sterling argued that this picture is not just preposterous but plainly wrong: there is no runaway acceleration in the technology of water management, say. There might be, he allows, in biotech, and in *Tomorrow Now* this is the arena he designates for drastic, disruptive change. He mandates a Shaper future (to borrow from the space opera tales, now long superannuated, of his early maturity), not a Mechanist one. Yet even here it seems he won't allow that the brakes might fall. Who would wish, he asks, to be a blemished early adopter engineered kid and adult, and it paints a poignant portrait of weird icky modified humans unable even to reproduce with their loved ones because of their scrambled chromosomes.

It's a cunning rhetorical move, but I suspect it's simply wrong in both social and biomedical terms. When a few extra or modified genes can be spliced into ovum or blastocyst, carrying the shaping information for enhanced intelligence and dexterity, sensitivity or robust confidence or both, not to mention immunity from routine aging and fated senescence—how many will resist the opportunity? And if the early adopters are less advantaged than their later kin, how does this differ from the ever-increasing educational and nutritional opportunities (not always taken, granted) of postindustrial culture's generations? More saliently still: if our DNA proves adjustable, it will surely grow *worse* so with time. If you detest your haircut, wait a few weeks or months and change it. Arguably, in the future this will also be true of your codons. Oddly, Sterling admits as much: genomically unmodified people will "swallow their advanced genetics . . . let microbes undergo all those hazards" (30). Why should this work for the unmodified but not the botched clones? We never find out.

Perhaps the central question, if I'm right, is: how far off is this future? Does it fall within Sterling's 50-year ambit? I'm inclined to think so. Cambridge biogerontologist Aubrey de Grey, the brilliant poster boy of Engineered Negligible Senescence, argues that we'll reach "escape velocity" from inevitable death sooner than that, just by resolving practical research problems that already have been identified. It might not help Sterling, or me, or most of my readers, but it will surely make the latter part of the next half century tremendously different—far more so than Sterling admits. He concludes in a poetic peroration that "The future is a lovely thing to contemplate, but . . . it is where we go to die" (300). "Death is merely a necessity" (301). Yes, it has been for untold generations, but might not remain so for much longer. Emortality is not in itself a recipe for singularity, for utter opacity—intelligence markedly greater than human is needed for that—but it starts to blur the image in the future scope.

But here I merely oppose Sterling's (reasoned) prejudice with my own. No doubt this arcane, stuffy argument will enter the realm of public policy within the next decade or two, as the first fruits of effective, cheap nanotechnology, extended healthful longevity, and hypercomputing (simulating folded proteins and unfolded brain functions alike) start to impact Sterling's New World Order and perhaps heal some of the turmoil and misery of his New World Disorder. Meanwhile, Sterling's darting mind will tear along the peripheries of both worlds, and we'll be the better for what he bears back for our inspection, an eager kid in a body that's already grandfatherly by ancestral standards. *Tomorrow Now* is already Yesterday Now, and arguably Tomorrow Lite, but it's loads of fun and blogmically tasty. ▶

Damien Broderick's singularity books are The Spike, The Last Mortal Generation, Transcension, and The Hunger of Time (with Rory Barnes). His own forthcoming bloggundity is Ferocious Minds: Polymathy and the New Enlightenment.

We are staying home this month, with only three weeks until we have to produce the next issue. School has begun for the kids, and October will be busy, with Albacon, Capclave, and the World Fantasy convention all jammed in before Kathryn and I go to Nantes in early November to the sf conference there.

The sf field looks vigorous and healthy to us heading into the fall season and Christmas, with a lot of good work ahead of us. ▶

—David G Hartwell
& the Editors



Bellydancers the first night of *Noréah*

Screed (letters of comment)

Brian Stableford, Reading, England

Thanks for the latest NYRSF (#191). I was particularly interested to read Alice Turner's essay on female werewolves, because I happen to be in the process of reading the first novel of that once-rare species, *La Princesse des Ténébres* by Jean de Chibra, published in 1898. Jean de Chibra was a pseudonym of Marguerite d'Eymery Vallette (who presumably intended it to be signed "de Chibra," thus contriving an anagram of her much more famous pseudonym Rachide). It's a fascinating proto-feminist exercise, and Mme Vallette obviously found the motif appealing because she followed up with a similarly combative variant on Alexandre Dumas's *Le meneur des loups* called (of course) *Le meneur des louves*. Interestingly, it was published more or less simultaneously with the other celebrated account of a female werewolf produced under the influence of the Decadent/Symbolist Movement, Clemence Housman's *The Were-wolf* (also 1898). I would love to do a translation of the de Chibra novel some day, but Mme. Vallette had the good sense to confine her decadence to her literary work and lived such a healthy life that she outlasted all her male contemporaries by decades, so it won't fall into the public domain until 2023, by which time I shall be 75 and probably past it. C'est la vie.

J. G. Stinson, Eastlake, Michigan

I send my thanks to David Drake for his "Faith, Hope, and Charity" and its reminder to writers (and fans should also take note of it) to "be nice to one another." I'd also like to thank him for invoking the 24-hour rule on his first draft of the article. My first encounter with this "rule" was in reference to sending e-mail and list postings, but it's certainly applicable to any writing, whether or not it provokes an emotional reaction. Many writers have stories about importunate fans, but I've also heard stories about rude writers (both to other writers and to readers). Drake's willingness to listen to his friends and rewrite his first draft is highly commendable.

September 12, 2004

Yesterday was the third anniversary of the September 11th attacks. I don't want to spend time talking about it now, but I do recommend our special issue, the Supplement to Issue 159, which records the immediate feelings of many members of the NY and Washington, DC, area sf community. It's available for free download in PDF at <www.nyrsf.com/159_wtc.pdf> or at Kevin Maroney's web archive <www.maroney.org>; printed copies are of course available from us as well.

Hurricane Ivan, still Category Five, is heading for the Gulf of Mexico (and maybe Florida, for their third hit in a month), and our dependable laser printer, after years of service, conked out and is now at the repair shop until Wednesday. Several fairly knowledgeable computer people failed, after hours of trying, to navigate the idiocies of MacOS 10.2 font handling, leaving us with a computer which can display articles with their proper fonts but can't print them and another computer which can print but which can't handle the fonts. Sigh. We will keep trying and I am certain of eventual success. With computers, you just have to throw more and more time at them and you can usually get the stuff to work. Or, sometimes, discover that have to replace it. We still haven't got our wireless equipment up and running well, after five months of very desultory effort.

But we did get the issue layout done. We received several long pieces at the relatively last minute, and so we have some strong material for next issue in the pipeline as well. All we need is time and money.

The Hugo Award ceremony in Boston was a week ago last night, and NTRSF came in a strong second in the Best Semiprozine category. This was our seventeenth nomination in seventeen years. We are very pleased, and thank all of you who support us and vote for us. The Worldcon was a busy time for us, lots of programming for Kathryn and me, and many professional obligations, and of course the kids. My favorite picture from the weekend is from the Harper Eos party, held offsite at the Boston Aquarium in the jellyfish exhibition halls. Peter Hartwell is advising GOH Terry Pratchett on the operation of a game while Elizabeth Hartwell looks on. (See it in color at <www.flickr.com/photo.gneid=350071>.)



(Continued on p. 23.)

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